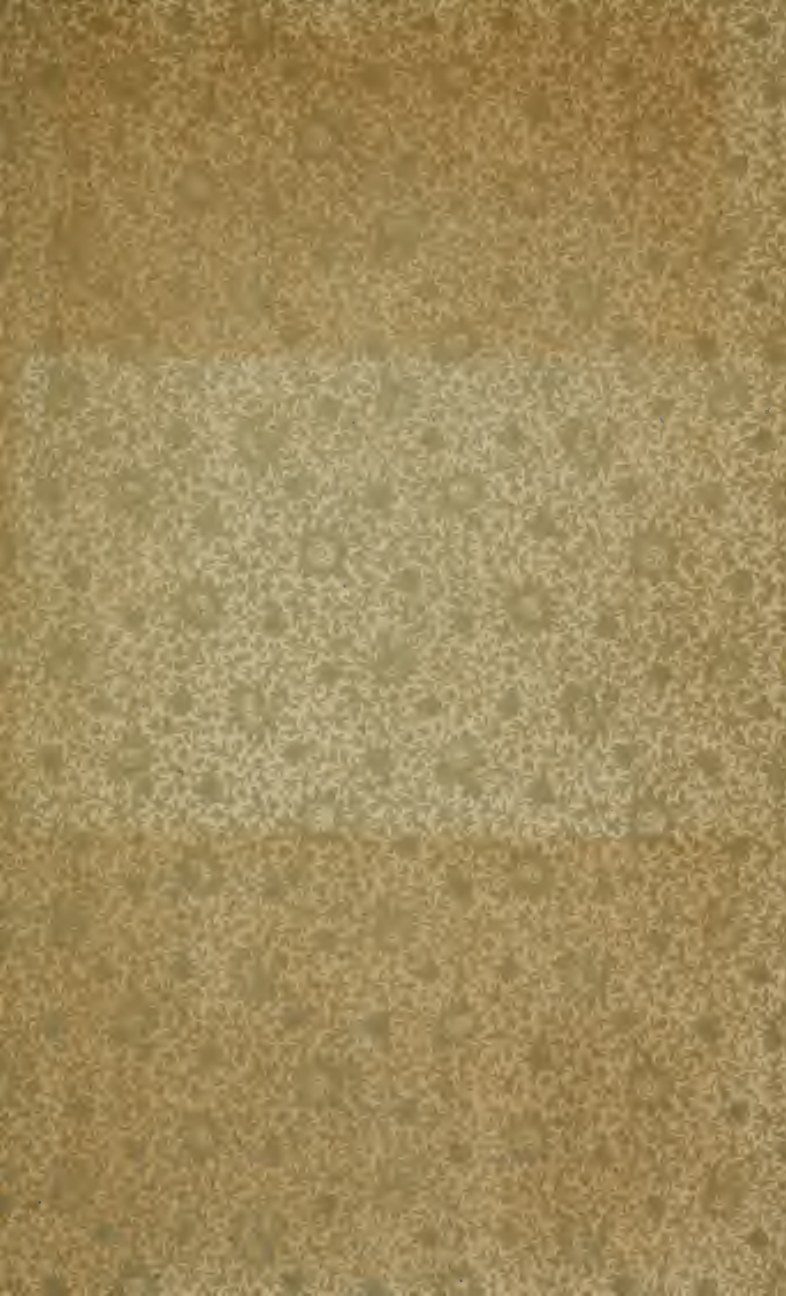


PERIWINKLE

"AS SOON KILL A MAN AS KILL A BOOK."

Thomas · Arthur · Jones.

What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.





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PERIWINKLE

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY

ARNOLD GRAY

AUTHOR OF

"THE WILD WARRINGTONS," "LIKE LOST SHEEP,"
Etc.

"The more a man learns of the wonderfulness of this world the more chary he is in saying what is and what is not a possible complication of events."—*From an Article on Victor Hugo in the "Athenæum."*

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

WARD & DOWNEY

12 YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN

1888

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BOOK II.

(Continued.)



DARYL DARKWOOD'S WIFE.

“He will hold thee, when his passion shall have spent
its novel force,
Something better than his dog, a little dearer than
his horse.”—*Tennyson*.

“O, what may man within him hide,
Though angel on the outward side!”
Shakespeare.

“Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to
be understood.”—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*.



PERIWINKLE.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THAT evening, after a delightful drive to Canterbury and back in Mr. Eversleigh's smart phaeton, followed by an excellent dinner at the celebrated "Black Stag," Leigh suggested to Daryl that they should have a cigar and a moonlight stroll upon the pier.

So, coffee finished, we left the hotel—first however taking Isla home to bed; for the child was dead tired with her long and happy day—and then we bent our steps towards the iron turnstiles.

The wind had wholly gone down at sunset; the night was beautifully fair and calm. The

tide was well in ; but the waves were hushed ; the sea was as smooth as a deep still river.

Lights far out—green, yellow, and glowing red—twinkled mysteriously upon invisible masts ; and were reflected in dim and tremulous hues within the quiet dark mirror which lay beneath them.

Now and again one heard the splash of oars near to the black and ghostly network of the pier timbers ; and from the dense cold shadow into the watery moonbeams a small boat perhaps would shoot jauntily forth—the adventuresome crew of it laughing, horse-playing, or shouting snatches of a rollicking song. What was the loveliness of a perfect night to them ?

High overhead rode the tranquil pale moon, gazing wonderingly down, as it were, upon the noisy sea-girt scene ; for the pier promenade was as usual thronged ; the crowd was chattering like a vast flock of jays ; the band was playing its liveliest ; the tramp of feet was like the tramp of an army. A seat in the neighbourhood of the lighted pavilion was not to be obtained ; every available chair and corner of resting-space being occupied by early-comers.

So those, of course, who could find no seats

were by circumstances compelled to keep upon the tramp.

No sooner did we gain the circular promenade than straightway we met the Ramage party. It was then half-past nine o'clock ; and Miss de Vere's duties at the Dome-by-the-Waves were now over. The Dome concert ended at nine ; but the fun of the place in reality—a " ball " following—lasted, I believe, until eleven or midnight. The evening glories of the Dome-by-the-Waves were known to me only by hearsay.

Mrs. Ramage, as was her wont, was respectfully effusive ; Miss de Vere as genial and self-possessed as ever. The girl was nicely and becomingly dressed in a soft white gown with much lace about it and old-gold coloured ribbons ; and she had on a high-shouldered tippet of otter's fur, being careful of her throat and chest. She wore perhaps too many narrow silver bangles that jingled incessantly ; and I did not altogether like the small close-fitting diamond stars—diamonds unmistakably—which flashed and burned in her pretty ears. But doubtless the jewels were the gift of Viscount Tracy, and so Aurora wore them.

Then for the first time—on that clear moon-

light night—I was introduced to Lord Tracy and to his friend Marc Gaveston ; who had been standing a little apart in the background, with their crutch-sticks tapping their teeth. Off came their hats with the utmost courtesy ; and I could perceive that neither of the two young men had the least idea that he had ever in his life before set eyes upon the wife of Daryl Darkwood.

I do not quite know how it came about ; but presently we three women found ourselves abreast and walking on ahead, with the four men in pairs strolling with their tobacco in the rear of us. Such awkward divisions in a friendly group always somehow arrange themselves.

“I am happy to congratulate you, Miss de Vere,” said I sincerely. “I believe I may do so now ?”

“Yes, you may do so now, Mrs. Darkwood,” replied the practical Aurora equably. “You see, I have learnt that it is always wisest to make sure of a good thing before you begin to brag about it ; or I should have told you something with regard to Lord Tracy and his attentions to me at the theatre before you left home for Than-gate.”

In a sudden burst of maternal pride, which

I suppose the worthy creature was unable any longer to hold in check, Mrs. Ramage, under cover of the tramping and the moonlight shadows, slipped her arm beneath mine and gave it a convulsive squeeze.

“Only fancy, Mrs. Darkwood, mem—only just fancy!” gasped she. “He’s a real live lord, and a kind-natured and a well-meaning one into the bargain; in spite of his dandy airs and his shiny boots. They’re to be married before the spring—the next spring as ever is—and Rory, if she lives, will be the Countess of Starch! Oh Lord, Mrs. Darkwood, I can’t bring myself to believe it yet—I can’t, mem, indeed!”

“Well, she is a thorough good girl, and she deserves her good fortune,” I promptly whispered back.

“A good girl? Ay, that she is!” said Mrs. Ramage, almost tearfully. “What do you think, mem? I am to have a suburban villa residence all to myself when they are married, just wherever I please to fancy; and I’ve chose Ealing Common, since my lord had no objection; and I’m to go and visit Rory at her own grand house just as often as I please, and I am to stay there too with the dear child just as long as ever I please; and—and—now isn’t he kind and

noble?" whispered Mrs. Ramage breathlessly, as the band struck up the "Pomona" waltz.

"Yes, indeed!" I answered sympathetically.

And then Miss de Vere went on to remark,—

"And so you understand, Mrs. Darkwood, I asked mother just to be good enough to hold her tongue to everybody until things had been brought to a real head. You can imagine that I didn't want to look like a fool through being in too great a hurry."

"And I'm sure I obeyed you, Rory, dear—I always do," mildly threw in Mrs. Ramage.

"Oh, yes, mother—it's all right!" gently answered Miss de Vere.

Then Mrs. Ramage hoped that she was not presuming, was not indeed going too far, in saying that she should be extremely disappointed if I did not come and have supper with them at their apartments on the following evening. The Captain—Mr. Darkwood, she ought to say—had promised her faithfully that he would bring me; and she—Mrs. Ramage—would really feel it if, after all, I should decline to honour her.

"Bless you, mother, Mrs. Darkwood isn't proud," observed Miss de Vere coolly—"she'll come!"

"Of course I mean to come," I answered

gaily ; at the time forgetting my scruples of the morning.

"How can I thank you, Mrs. Darkwood?" exclaimed Mrs. Ramage gratefully.

"Our thanks are due to you, Mrs. Ramage," was my light-hearted reply ; "for I think it is very kind of you to invite us."

"Gracious !" after a while ejaculated Mrs. Ramage—"where is Rory?"

Behind us, Daryl, who had overheard, laughed.

"We were just wondering, Mrs. Ramage," said he, "what had become of Lord Tracy."

"Oh," said Mrs. Ramage, in a more comfortable tone, "if that's the case, sir, it is all right then !"

Mrs. Ramage and I continued our promenade together. Presently Daryl called out,—

"Flower—I say, Flower—wasn't it so? I am right, am I not?"—appealing to me on some trivial point or other that he was masterfully arguing out with young Gaveston and Mr. Eversleigh. It so happened that I was able to settle satisfactorily the question mooted between them. In a few words I did so ; and then turned again to Mrs. Ramage.

"Heigh-ho !" said she, with a sentimental sigh which somehow came oddly from the mother of

Miss de Vere. "Never can I forget the old days, Mrs. Darkwood, whenever I hear the Captain calling you 'Flower.'"

"Cannot you?" I smiled. "Why not?"

"I never heard the name in my life," said Mrs. Ramage pensively, "until I went to live at Hoxton; and that was years ago. My poor dear husband, mem, was alive then."

"Was he?" I said gently, not knowing what else to say.

"Yes, Mrs. Darkwood—he was alive then, and in the best of 'ealth, poor dear," said Mrs. Ramage, with another not uncheerful sigh; "and it was some little while before Rory was born. We had two rooms in those days, I remember, in a house in the St. Vincent Road, Hoxton. It was not a very genteel part, mem, to speak the truth, in spite of its high-sounding name—nothing like so genteel as Chesterfield Avenue; nothing like! But it was rather hard times with us just then, Mrs. Darkwood. I had no employment at all that year; and my poor dear Abraham worked the limelight at the Albion Theatre Royal. So two rooms, you see, was about as much as we could manage at that time of day—with our own furniture o' course.

"Well, mem, at the top of the house, occu-

pying only one room, there was a man and a woman by the name of Wilson—at least, they gave out that Wilson was their name; but none of the other lodgers, I don't think, believed that they were man and wife, or that Wilson was their real name. I know we did not, my Abraham and me; though," said Mrs. Ramage earnestly, "may Heaven forgive us if we was wrong and uncharitable!

"One sweet little child they had—such a sweet little duck she was, mem—who was just as shy and frightened sometimes as your own dear little angel, Mrs. Darkwood. Indeed I am often reminded of that little child at Hoxton when I look at your own pretty darling, Missy Isla. But when I knew baby Wilson, she couldn't have been so old as Missy—"

"And was her name Isla too, then?" I broke in absently.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Darkwood! Don't you understand? The little Hoxton child's name was 'Flower'—the same as yours."

"Flower!" I exclaimed. "How curious!" adding, with a smile—"Why, my name, after all, Mrs. Ramage, it appears, is not such an uncommon one as I have generally been inclined to think it. My husband once had a very

young cousin whom he never saw ; she—she died, I have heard, before he came home from India ; and she was called ‘Flower.’ There is nothing new under the sun. How true it is !”

“ Well, I never !” said Mrs. Ramage. “ But I was going to tell you, mem, that something very shocking happened at that house in the St. Vincent Road ; and little Flower Wilson was fetched away from it by her grandfather, I—I think it was ; no, it was her——”

“ Something very shocking ?” I interrupted, beginning to feel a genuine interest in Mrs. Ramage’s inconsequent narrative. “ And what was that ?”

“ A murder,” said Mrs. Ramage, lowering her voice. “ As dreadful a murder—and all through drink, they said—as ever was——”

Again I interrupted the narrator ; both my interest and my curiosity now strongly awakened.

“ Not the little child, I hope ?” I said quickly.

“ Dear no, mem ! I told you just now—or meant to—that baby Wilson was fetched away from that house at Hoxton directly after her father had been——”

But it seemed that Mrs. Ramage was not then to be permitted to finish her story; and perhaps I was not wholly sorry to lose the end of it, whatever it might be, since the tale was evidently one in which the horrible predominated in no mean degree; and enough of that which was terrific had already overshadowed my past knowledge of life!

Daryl, in a playful manner, with his stick was tapping Mrs. Ramage upon the shoulder. She broke off immediately in her talk of Hoxton, and her gloomy reminiscences of the St. Vincent Road there, and faced my husband, broadly smiling.

"What is it, Captain?" she said, with that queer, arch, sidewise ducking movement of hers, which somehow suggested a curtsy and yet which was not one. It was more of a respectful wriggle than anything else—any way I never saw anything like it until I came to know Mrs. Ramage.

We had all halted in a group together.

"Mrs. Ramage," said Daryl joyously, "we are about tired of this eternal tramping round and round—this tread-mill sort of business, don't you know—aren't you?—and begin to feel a craving for, a—a—an absolute need of, a refresher of

some kind. Come with us, Mrs. Ramage, and have a glass of wine?"

Mrs. Ramage wriggled more than ever.

"Oh, lor', sir," said she, "I really don't think I ought—"

"Pooh!" said Daryl airily, taking her by the arm. "A claret and apollinaris, or a port and soda with a dash of lemon in it, will do you all the good in the world. Now don't be unsociable, there's a dear creature!"

"Oh, lor', Captain," said Mrs. Ramage more faintly, "what a one you are, to be sure! I—I—" She pretended to hang back; but all the same she was allowing Daryl to lead her in the direction of the dazzling pavilion; young Gaveston following them, laughing, apparently much amused.

"Come along, Flower—come along, Eversleigh!" Daryl looked over his shoulder to shout to Leigh and me, before the glass doors of the pavilion closed on them. He was still holding Mrs. Ramage by the arm.

"No, thank you," said I.

"No, thank you," said Leigh Eversleigh.

Thus it happened that we two found ourselves alone with each other—alone, that is to say, in the midst of the pier crowd, which still kept up

its perpetual march—with the band playing, and the high fair moon overhead.

“Let us get to the flag-post at the end yonder,” suggested Leigh, offering me his arm. “There it will be possible, Mrs. Darkwood, to feel a breath of fresh air.”

“Willingly,” I replied; and accepted his proffered escort.

To the smartly-dressed multitude the band and the noisy pavilion were far more attractive than was a contemplation of the grand serenity of the wide lone sea, with the wan moon-smiles quivering within its dark and awful bosom; for here, upon the triangular promontory where, with faces turned seaward, we now stood, there was space to stretch oneself and to breathe comfortably.

“What an exquisite night!” Mr. Eversleigh murmured as if to himself; looking slowly upward to the purple dome of heaven, all strewn as it was with its myriad white stars. “What a perfect night!”

I said nothing. The loneliness, the mystery of the sea at night was filling, as it ever did, my heart with a deep sense of peace and of rest.

Suddenly upon the crowd there fell a hush.

One could now distinctly hear the prolonged “swish—s—s—sh” of the little growing waves, as with a ghostly whisper they went creeping inland to fling themselves wantonly at the base of the rugged cliffs. Calm as it was now, there might yet be foam-capped breakers ere the dawn ; for the sea is as capricious, as changeful as a woman. The Thangate summer mob had fallen dumb, as it were, to a man ; the cornet-player of the band was playing his customary solo—which this evening proved to be “Some Day.”

Far over the quiet sea rang out the slow sweet air ; clear, true, unutterably pathetic. The cornet-player, as he played, himself seemed to feel every note of the music.

The link of tacit sympathy—or whatever it should be correctly termed—which existed between Leigh Eversleigh and me kept us both silent. He had folded his arms as he stood ; his chin rested upon his breast. For myself—well, for the life of me I could have spoken no syllable just then ; my heart was touched to aching by the haunting pathos of the melody ; the tears in my throat gathered thickly and rose to my burning eyes.

Had there been by my side a husband who really loved me, and whom I truly loved, I

might have pressed my forehead to his dear shoulder and have wept outright.

Did my staunch friend Leigh Eversleigh, although so silent, comprehend this? I cannot tell.





CHAPTER XIX.

MRS. RAMAGE'S party was emphatically an event in my life. Through many a strange experience had I gone as Daryl Darkwood's wife; but Mrs. Ramage's festival in honour of her daughter Aurora's engagement, taken with the consequences which were the direct result of the affair, was unquestionably for me the strangest and saddest experience of all.

The supper-hour was ten o'clock; and a few minutes before the appointed time we—Daryl, Mr. Eversleigh, and I—presented ourselves at the Ramages' apartments, which were up-stairs, like our own at Miss Piper's. Viscount Tracy, his friend young Gaveston, and Mr. Binkworthy the theatrical manager, were already there; the three men having returned home with Miss de Vere straightway from the Dome-by-the-Waves.

Aurora, who was wearing the gown in which she had sung her songs at the Dome, to-night looked really handsome—undeniably beautiful. It was a tasteful gown of palest lemon-coloured muslin, with many little frills about the narrow trained skirt of it, all edged with pretty lace. The elbow-sleeves revealed her shapely arms, upon which, in the house, the numerous bangles she was so fond of did not appear in the least out of place. She wore upon her left shoulder a lovely cluster of hot-house flowers, both scarlet bloom and white, with long feathery sprays of maiden-hair fern—and in her fair hair Lord Tracy had just fastened some bright-red geranium, with a sprig or two of lemon-plant as well.

He was paying Aurora the most marked attention, and seemed passionately devoted to this clever young woman of his choice; whilst Aurora herself treated her titled slave with a cool and easy familiarity which was decidedly amusing to witness—her bright face was flushed with genuine pleasure notwithstanding.

As we three guests from the cliff were strangers to Mr. Binkworthy, we were each of us in turn presented to the manager of the Levity. It was Mrs. Ramage—who was attired in a bronze shot-silk gown, with a large embroidered collar and

a cameo brooch, and a gorgeous new cap that would not keep straight—who with much pride and many a wriggle performed the necessary introduction; Mr. Binkworthy, with extreme affability, bowing to the right and to the left of us.

He was a short, stout man, in a short jacket, who wore many rings upon his fat and not over-clean hands. A white waistcoat, cut low, displayed a fine expanse of rather limp shirt-front, in the centre of which shone a big carbuncle, and below which dangled an immense gold locket and chain. Mr. Binkworthy, in his way, was an illustrious person.

At supper I sat between the manager and young Gaveston; and both of them made themselves exceedingly agreeable. Daryl, at Mrs. Ramage's request, was occupying the end seat at table immediately facing her own, in order that he might relieve her of the work of carving. "If you don't mind, Captain," said Mrs. Ramage in her most wheedling tone, "just cutting up the fowls and that for me, I can manage the lobster-salad and the rest."

And so, facing each other—hock, claret, and by-and-by champagne flowing without stint—Daryl and Mrs. Ramage cracked many a joke

together, and drank each other's health quite a dozen times at least.

Naturally, in these circumstances, as the evening wore on, the hilarity of the little party waxed stronger and stronger; Mr. Binkworthy, the manager, telling some really funny stories; Daryl, in highest spirits, capping them with others still funnier and wilder.

"Stop, Captain, do," cried Mrs. Ramage, laughing and choking together; "or you'll be the death o' me, I know!" And then, recovering herself, in her best manner she forthwith proceeded to "take wine" with Viscount Tracy.

"My love to you, Mrs Ramage," said he pleasantly.

"The same to you, my lord," replied Aurora's mother, affectionately beaming upon her future son-in-law.

At that instant, raising my own eyes from listening to some lengthy but not too wise remark of young Marc Gaveston's, I encountered those of Mr. Eversleigh—who was sitting opposite to me and my drawling companion—with a queer questioning light lurking within them. With one hand meanwhile he stroked his long tan moustache; and I could

not help wondering whether he was smiling beneath it.

He, I somehow felt, was wondering what I thought of Mrs. Ramage's party ; but I knew that we must wait until the next day before we could quietly compare notes upon the event.

The next day !

How little did I dream on that brief evening of Bohemian merry-making, in that short hour of informal conviviality, what the "next day" for me would bring to pass ! Alas, how hard and wrong it seems that often when one is brightest and happiest, then is it that the shadows of life are nearest !

Many were the good things upon Mrs. Ramage's supper-table ; and the wines fortunately were irreproachable. Lord Tracy himself, having undertaken to attend to this department of the feast, had got down all that was requisite from his chambers in town.

But, excellent as was everything upon the Ramages' hospitable board, the business of feeding could not go on for ever. Moreover, it had been previously settled that with the after-supper refreshments and cigarettes—also for these latter, of a fragrant "Egyptian" brand, were Mrs. Ramage's guests indebted to the good nature and

forethought of Lord Tracy—music was to be the principal feature of the entertainment.

Very heartily, it having been proposed by Daryl—a toast, said he, half-seriously, half-joyously, which must on no account be forgotten—had we drunk the health of the engaged couple, and wished them a long life and much true happiness in it. And then, his lordship having in reply made a quite neat and witty little speech, sincerely thanking us on behalf of himself and of Aurora, Mr. Binkworthy proposed the health of Mrs. Ramage. And so the fun went on, until supper was over and cigarettes were lighted, and Miss de Vere opened her hired piano.

She was going to sing to us.

She sang her serio-comic songs with real humour, with all the wit and vivacity of a trained *comédienne* of her kind; and Lord Tracy sat by her at the piano as she played, his arm thrown round the back of her chair. He was very much in love, and very jealous. He meant everyone to understand, it was clear, that Aurora belonged to him—that she was his own, his very own, and nobody else's. And then Daryl sang the "Yeoman's Wedding" in a rollicking easy manner that won for him plenty of applause;

and young Gaveston, in the smallest of tenors, piped the "Power of Love."

Then once more my husband obliged the company, now with "Jack's Yarn" and the "Warrior Bold;" and by-and-by Miss de Vere again delighted us all by her spirited rendering of her great Levity success, "Would you believe it?"—which set Mr. Binkworthy thumping the table until all the glasses rattled together.

But Leigh Eversleigh, when pressed to perform, for some reason quietly but firmly begged to be excused; and Lord Tracy himself ruefully declared that he never had sung a song in his life. "I don't even know one note from another—except that some of 'em are black, and some are white," said his lordship frankly—"wish I did."

"Rory would soon teach you, my lord," sniggered Mrs. Ramage.

"Will you, darling?" whispered the enamoured young man, bending low over his bright divinity, his cheek touching her ear.

"If you're good," replied Aurora briskly, out loud.

"He's far gone, ain't he?" murmured Mr. Binkworthy confidentially to Mrs. Ramage. "Head-over-heels this time, and no mistake!"

"Hush—sh!" said Mrs. Ramage. "You

don't know, sir, what a noble young man he is." And then she told Mr. Binkworthy about the villa-residence she was to have upon Ealing Common, when Aurora should no longer be Miss de Vere, but the wife of Viscount Tracy.

"I am sure that you are a musician, Mrs. Darkwood," presently called out the manager of the Levity—"from the style in which you play your husband's accompaniments any one can tell that. You sing—now don't you, madam?"

"Mrs. Darkwood sing!" exclaimed Leigh Eversleigh, speaking up involuntarily. "I should rather say she did, sir!"

"Rather indeed!" echoed Miss de Vere in her hearty way; wheeling suddenly round upon the music-chair in order to face the company. "Why, I declare I had clean forgotten! Sing? Of course she does—sings as well as plays. Mrs. Darkwood, if she pleases, can beat us all hollow."

"Mrs. Darkwood sings like—like any nightingirl," Mrs. Ramage was earnestly assuring Mr. Binkworthy, "and I am sure that she will kindly favour us. Won't you, mem?"—turning from the manager and appealing to me.

It would be foolish to refuse when it was plain that they were all against a refusal—to

make excuses when I had actually no sensible one ready ; and so, though I myself was scarcely that night in the vein for singing—like Mr. Eversleigh, preferring the *rôle* of listener and observer—I at once complied with as gay a grace as I could.

After a moment's pondering, uncertain what they would like—my repertory and that of Miss de Vere being so dissimilar—I remembered and sang “Kathleen Mavourneen,” deciding that something old, simple, and pathetic from me would please them best.

I do not think that I was mistaken in my choice ; for Mrs Ramage's sea-side drawing-room was as silent as an empty room until my song was ended. And then, when the last note of the accompaniment had died quite away—well, for some time afterwards they would not allow me to stir from the piano ; but besought me again and again to sing to them “those sweet old songs.”

At last, after “Auld Robin Gray,” Lord Tracy begged me to give them something more modern—“‘Going to Market,’ or ‘For Ever and For Ever,’ don't you know ?” said he. Knowing it the better of the two, and it suiting me the better of the two, I sang the latter ; and then I

got up resolutely from the music-chair, lightly remarking that I had become hoarse. So many compliments had been heaped upon me, I was feeling quite pleased and excited.

The room to me now had grown intolerably warm and "smoky," and I went over to one of the long and narrow windows, both of which opened conveniently to the floor ; there being a balcony running along outside of them, upon which to-night were placed two or three fragile wicker chairs.

I stepped out into the air and sat down in one of these chairs ; thankful to feel the fanning of the gentle night-breeze which breathed inland from the wide dark sea. The roadway—the "Parade," as it was called—below was now utterly deserted. Thangate church-clocks were chiming the half-hour after one.

Somewhat to my surprise, Mr. Binkworthy joined me upon the balcony ; seating himself heavily in another of the basket-chairs, which creaked piteously beneath his weight. He drew his familiarly towards mine ; but said rather awkwardly—the rest were again talking and laughing within the lighted room behind us,—

"And how do you like Thangit on the 'ole, Mrs. Darkwood ? Ever been here before—eh ?"

I told Mr Binkworthy that I liked Thangate very much, on the whole, and that I never had been there before. Then I stared at my stout companion and wondered what was coming next.

He hum'd and ha'd, and appeared to be at a loss for a conversational idea. As I found his fidgety dumbness a great deal more irritating than his speech, I said carelessly,—

“How odd the bathing-machines look, do they not, all drawn up in a dark line under the sea-wall yonder?”

Mr. Binkworthy merely glanced in the direction indicated, and answered automatically,—

“They do. Mrs. Darkwood,” said the manager abruptly, “you’ve got a rare fine voice of your own.”

I smiled a little coldly.

“You told me so a few minutes ago.”

“You was taught abroad, I understand?” he observed thoughtfully.

“Yes.”

“H’m—ha, just so—h’m!” said Mr. Binkworthy, slowly rubbing his rather stubbly chin.

I yawned as slightly and as politely as I could. But the mild hint was lost upon Mr. Binkworthy

—or he would not see it. He laid his fat be-ringed hand upon my arm. I gently withdrew it from his touch.

“Look here, madam,” said the manager, in a tone that had all at once grown brisk and business-like; “how would you like to be put—to be put into the way of earning a—a—well, say a nice little lump of coin every week? To look in at a certain shop, regular, on every Saturday afternoon, and to find a envelope addressed to you, and waiting for you there, with—h’m, ha—well, let us say with between twenty and thirty pound inside?”

“Very much indeed,” I replied readily; but still quite coldly. “Always supposing that I could clearly see my way to such singular good fortune.”

Mr. Binkworthy slapped his thigh.

“Madam, it’s as clear as daylight,” said he.

“I am afraid that I am very obtuse,” I rejoined.

The manager of the Levity made an impatient noise in the roof of his mouth; frowned, and said,—

“I am afraid, madam, you mean to be.”

“Positively, Mr. Binkworthy, I do not understand you,” I remarked calmly.

The manager then rose from his creaking basket-chair, which indeed was more than a size too small for him; and stood upon the balcony, with his back to the sea. He was rather nervously fingering his prodigious watch-chain and locket.

“Mrs. Darkwood,” he said, “it would, I’m aware, be impertinent on my part to infer that you would be glad to—to be put into the way of earning anything; and therefore I don’t infer it. I hope you understand me, madam—I don’t infer it. All I wish, however, to say is—supposing—mind, only supposing as you was ever to find yourself in want of a little ready cash, to buy some pretty gowns with, gew-gaws, or what not, and didn’t quite know which way to turn for it—see?—why, all that you’ve got to do is to just think of me; or, better still, come down to me in my room at the theatre, and the matter shall be arranged with as little delay as possible. It on’y rests with yourself.”

There was no misunderstanding Mr. Bink-worthy now. I understood him perfectly; and I told him so.

“You mean,” I said in my chilliest manner, “that you would like me to sing for you at your variety theatre; and that you would pay me

something between twenty and thirty pounds a-week simply for my singing there? Is that it, Mr. Binkworthy?"

"You've hit it exactly, Mrs. Darkwood," said the manager boldly. "If you would come every night to the *Levity*—to the *Levity*, and to no other theatre in London, mind—and sing me three, only three old songs or modern ballads, whichever you like, just as you sung 'em here to-night—why, I would willingly give you twenty-five pound a week to start with. Many a lady, bless ye, have done it before you; and there's nothing to be ashamed of in earning honest money! You have got a lovely voice, Mrs. Darkwood," said the manager eagerly—"a lovely voice, splendidly trained; and you would just about fetch 'em with that simple dignified style of yours; and an old ballad or a pretty new song on the boards nowadays is about as popular as anything you can give 'em. I ought to know. It beats the ballet into fits; and brings the swells a-dropping in, too, after dinner. Besides, you needn't sing under your own name any more than Miss Aurora Ramage does; and a lady who goes in for the simple ballad singing business can dress as modestly as——"

I held up my hand. I cut Mr. Binkworthy short.

"You are too kind," I quietly said; "but my answer is emphatically 'No.'"

"You decline then?" said the manager; reluctant to take a plain refusal.

"Do not you comprehend me? Most assuredly do I decline."

"Many women would jump at the chance," grumbled Mr. Binkworthy.

"Perhaps; but in more respects than one I am unlike other women. For example, I am fond enough, I grant you, of the theatre itself—of a good play or a comic opera. Yet, for all that, I cannot bear to think of women as being upon the stage—upon any stage—no matter how gifted they may be."

The manager laughed offensively.

"There's no sense, madam, in talking like that. Women on the stage—or, as you'd have it, no women on the stage—why, hang it all, how's the stage to do without 'em—eh?"

"I well know that my ideas upon the subject are inconsistent, ridiculous, impossible, if you like," I replied equably. "Nevertheless I say, I maintain, that a woman, whoever she be, who goes upon the stage, in so going loses something

of her purity—of her womanhood. She may be highly gifted, I repeat—a bright genius—but her genius is tarnished in the glare of the foot-lights. At any rate, that, sir, is my opinion of the matter.”

The manager laughed again as coarsely as before.

“In these days,” said he vulgarly, “such notions won’t wash; and the sooner, madam, you get rid of ’em the better.” He was moving away, but turned to add—“Well, you know, Mrs. Darkwood, a day may come—for the world is full of rum surprises—a day may come, I say, when you may be not altogether unwillin’ to look me up. I am mostly to be found myself at the Levity; and any letter addressed to me there will always be safe to find me. Don’t forget; I shall be ’appy to see you or to ’ear from you at any time.”

“Thank you,” I answered—I fear ironically.

Once more Mr. Binkworthy was turning to leave the balcony; to re-enter Mrs. Ramage’s close illuminated drawing-room, where champagne-corks were still flying gaily, and Miss de Vere was still singing her serio-comic songs. A thought had suddenly darted into my mind—a thought that disturbed me acutely.

"Mr Binkworthy," I called to him—"one moment!"

He at once came back to me.

"What!—you have altered your mind?" he said, brightening. "How like a woman, to be sure!"

"Nothing of the kind," I said impatiently. "Mr Binkworthy, I want you—as a great favour I want you to promise me that you will mention nothing, nothing whatever, if you please, of this conversation to Dar—to my husband."

"I wasn't going to," put in the manager sulkily. "Where's the good? Is that all then?"

With a sigh of relief I sank back into my chair.

"Yes, Mr. Binkworthy, that is all; and I am very much obliged to you," I said, not without a vague feeling of gratitude towards the manager after all.

He left me then; and I was alone. Not for long however; for the flimsy window-curtains behind me again were parted; and out stepped Mr. Eversleigh. Whatever may have been happening within the noisy room in our rear, Leigh himself at this hour was as calm, as cool, and as genially self-possessed as when, some few

hours before, with Daryl and me, he had arrived at Mrs. Ramage's door.

His society after that of my late companion was a thoroughly welcome change ; and I frankly assured him—Leigh—of the fact. But I told him nothing of Mr. Binkworthy's curious proposition. He took the wicker chair vacated by the manager, and quietly drifted into talking of music and of books, with many a kindred theme besides in which we both of us felt the same keen sympathy and interest. His nature was too kindly, too essentially gentle, to discuss the oddities of—to in any wise criticise—Mrs. Ramage's festival within Mrs. Ramage's own apartments. So together we chatted on very pleasantly of one thing and another—for it happened that most of the foreign towns with which I was acquainted were equally well known to Mr. Eversleigh—and I, at any rate, forgot how late, or indeed how early, it had already grown.

The clocks were striking three. A cold dawn-wind was breathing from the east ; wan flame-streaks would soon be breaking over the chill gray sea.

A voice shouting close behind us caused me and Leigh Eversleigh to start and look round.

“Hullo, you two !” cried my husband, in the

open window. "Perhaps, when you've quite done—done your spooning out there, you'll—you'll come home. At all events, I mean—I mean my wife to come home with me. You, Eversleigh, 'course, may please yourself. So—so, Flower, you just look alive, will you? Can't you see I'm—I'm waiting—been waiting this hour or more for you? Come along!"

Very pale, and trembling slightly, I went directly to get my hat. Leigh remained unmoved. He perceived what Daryl's condition was; and he wisely ignored the insulting remark that Daryl had made.

"All right, old fellow," he said, rising and stretching himself; "it is latish. I'll come with you."

"Oh, please yourself, man!" hiccoughed Daryl again. As he spoke, he was steadying himself by the framework of the window. "My society is no attraction, I'm well aware. Still, there's my wife. She—she, I dare say, will be glad of your company if—if I can't 'preciate it, don't ye know."

In the sitting-room, Mr. Binkworthy, young Gaveston, and Viscount Tracy were still smoking cigarettes and drinking champagne; or perhaps it was brandy-and-soda—I don't know.

Miss de Vere, looking annoyed—nay, exceedingly put out—was tapping the floor with her embroidered slipper. Mrs. Ramage, I was shocked to notice, was fast asleep upon the sofa.

As speedily as we could manage our departure we got away ; and Mr. Eversleigh accompanied my husband and me up to Miss Piper's house on the cliff. Without Leigh's strong aid I shudder to think what, in the circumstances, I should have done ; I was helpless and horrified enough as it was !

With every lurch and stagger Daryl swore at us both ; and told Mr. Eversleigh that he—Leigh himself—was drunk.

At Miss Piper's door Mr. Eversleigh left us.

If our hands—his and mine—at parting clung most pitifully together, God above us knows that it was no sin of either. His manly chivalrous heart, I knew, was bleeding sorely for me ; my own heart, aching very bitterly, was unspeakably thankful for such real sympathy as his.

What more, alas, could he do for me ?

So he and I, in the chilly dawn, said good-bye to each other ; and from that sad hour it was a long, long day before I saw Leigh Eversleigh again.



CHAPTER XX.

DARYL, with many a curse and stumble, somehow got upstairs ; and I heard a door creak cautiously upon the top landing of all, and felt that Miss Piper, hearing the commotion, had slipped out of her bed and was peeping at us over the banisters.

He dropped into the first arm-chair he came to ; thrust down his hands into his trousers-pockets ; stretched his long legs widely apart ; and growled out that he wanted a brandy-and-soda—a big one ; and then he swore at me for being so “ infernally slow ” in getting what he wanted, though I was in reality obeying him as fast as my trembling hands would let me.

When Daryl Darkwood was very tipsy, then was it that he was most inclined to be quarrelsome.

Having from hard experience learnt this fact, I am well aware that I should have been more wary, more tactful, in dealing with him at such

a time as the present—should have waited until he was sober ; and for a while, at any rate, should have smothered as best I could the hot indignation which was consuming me.

Had I been wiser, had I been more patient and forbearing, I should have been spared much sorrow, much degradation—some almost hopeless suffering in the after days !

But there is no woman living who is without a spark of temper of her own ; and mine, as a rule under thorough control, not an hour before had been cruelly tried.

So, at the sideboard, I mixed for my husband a huge tumbler of soda-water and brandy ; and holding my head high, and conscious of my own heart-beats, I crossed the room and carried the mixture to him. With my bosom heaving, with my breath coming short and fast, I stood there before the arm-chair in which he lay sprawling.

“Your conduct to-night has been hateful, Daryl. You have insulted me intolerably !” said I recklessly. “And, if you were a man with a grain of honourable feeling about you, you would this minute, sir, rise and beg my pardon.”

Here was a flinging down of the iron glove with a vengeance !

Before in any manner answering, he took the

glass from my hand, and at a draught swallowed half the contents of it. It seemed to do him good—to sober him somewhat. His own hand was steadier than mine when he set down the glass upon a small table near him. It was by this time broadening dawn—in fact, nearly bright day—and the room was full of rose and gray light.

It was too late now to wish that I had given my anger time to cool; at least, wishing could avail me nothing. The rash words were uttered—there was no unsaying them. Heaven help me!

“H’m—so!” said my husband then, in his most insufferable way. “Beg your pardon, Periwinkle, ’m—eh? Something fresh, that, isn’t it? Ha, ha, ha! Besides, why the deuce, pray, should I beg your pardon, Flower my dear, when I told you only the truth, ’m—eh?” hiccoughed he, in the nasal tone of the half-sobered tippler.

“What!” I cried, aghast.

“Why, only the truth, Periwinkle,” Daryl repeated with an insolent laugh. “I said—didn’t I?—that you and Eversleigh were—were spooning together out there upon the balcony at old mother Ramage’s; and so you were, by God!—or I never in my life saw a spooning couple. But what’s there to fly into a passion about now, ’m—eh? Ain’t you always at it?”

When I could manage my voice, my hands behind me locked together convulsively, I said—and the husky words seemed to hurt me as they came,—

“That is a lie, Daryl Darkwood. And you know that it is a lie!”

He laughed again in my face.

“Ha, ha, ha! 'Pon my honour, Flower, your acting isn't bad—not half bad! But the innocence of the part is just a trifle overdone, my dear; especially with your own husband, you see, who is—well, who is behind the scenes, don't ye know.”

“Daryl, as I live, I do not understand you!” I cried passionately; perhaps piteously. And it was the truth—I did not understand.

“No, it won't do, Periwinkle—clever as you are,” said he, slowly shaking his head in an odiously wise and solemn manner. He clutched the tall tumbler, and this time drained it. He thumped down the empty glass, and sprawled back again in his chair. Everybody knows—and who better than yourself?—that Leigh Eversleigh—confound him!” growled Daryl, with an abrupt change of tone and gloomily-lowered eyebrows—“is—is in love with my wife. Worships the ground she walks upon, in fact, and is never happy away from her side. Ha, ha!”

I could not speak. I was simply dumfounded. Speechless I stared at Daryl, with wide dismayed eyes.

"Oh—ah, you are putting it on pretty strong, I can see!" he sneered, scowling upward at me from beneath the penthouse of his straight dusky brows; "but you are a fool, as I hinted just now, to get acting the innocent saint for my edification. 'Pon my soul, I should have thought that you had discovered by this time that I am not to be gulled quite so easily. Ha, ha! A neat idea of yours, that, Flower—your pretending a virtuous ignorance, the sweet simplicity of budding seventeen at this time o' day! Rather too old and experienced for that, ain't you? The joke is too rich—'pon my soul—'pon my soul it is. Why, Eversleigh himself would grin at it if he were here!"

Still I did not speak. I could only stare at Daryl. Had he drunk himself mad? I was wondering dully. Had something gone wrong with his brain? The first heat of my intense anger had died out. A horrible cold fear was stealing over and benumbing my whole body. What strange words would he say next? I soon heard.

"I suppose," he shouted hoarsely, sitting bolt upright, and gripping the arms of the easy-chair

to keep his balance as he sat—"I suppose—I suppose you want me to believe that—that he came down here to Thangate expressly to see *me*, 'm—eh? That's very likely; isn't it?"

"What else—what else—should he come for?" I whispered. I was obliged to put my hand to my throat; or I felt that I could not have articulated a syllable.

"Go on, Flower—that's capital! We all know—don't we?—how fond he is of the youngster, for—for the sake of the child's father, of course. Oh, yes—how remarkably kind! You believe that, don't you?" said Daryl savagely.

"Why not?" I answered stupidly. "What should I believe, then, Daryl?"

I felt faint and bewildered. I did but very dimly comprehend the nature of the accusation that he was trying to bring against me. However, in the next minute every faculty within me was stirred into passionate life.

"Oh, ah—of course we understand!" continued my husband, in the same taunting savage voice, and with the same fierce menacing scowl. "It is for my sake—his friend's; not for the sake of his friend's wife—deuce take him, no!—that he nightly over the cards flings—flings away his money—purposely loses a heap or so o' gold,

when perhaps with a little thought and care he might as easily keep it in his own pocket. H'm, h'm—it is for the sake of his dear friend—not for the sake of that dear friend's wife, oh, no!—that Leigh Eversleigh happens to have discovered a miraculously generous dealer in the picture line down the Haymarket way, who for a wretched sketch or daub not worth five sovereigns can at once by Eversleigh be persuaded to fork out fifteen or twenty! H'm, ah—wonderful dealers, those, that Eversleigh knows down the Haymarket way! He can call 'em into existence at a moment's notice, it seems. I could never find 'em myself—often tried to, 'm sure. But then the friend of his bosom—his old school-fellow and college-chum—must be allowed to live in comfort, and want for no luxury that money can obtain; must have good clothes—good fare; his little daughter, being delicate, must be sent to the seaside, and whilst there, too, must be furnished with the best of everything. Good heavens, why not—h'm? But the mother of the youngster—the friend's beautiful wife—bah, she counts for naught! For naught, I say, Periwinkle!”—snapping his fingers. “What is she to Leigh Eversleigh? Ha, ha, ha! it is too good, isn't it? And so—and so, Flower, you perceive——”

I stopped him. I could endure no more of his fiendish banter. The helpless, horrified silence which I had kept while listening to him now suddenly gave way to something like a scream. I flung myself upon my knees at the feet of Daryl Darkwood; and clung desperately to his arm with two strained white quivering hands.

“You mean to say, in this ironical, round-about manner—you are telling me,” I gasped, “that—that we are, even now, and—and have been doing so all along—living—living upon Leigh Eversleigh’s money! His charity—nothing less! You are telling me—telling me, Daryl—is it possible?—that it was his money that brought us hither to the sea; that he has, in plain language, been keeping us—all three of us—ever since—ever since we have known him! It is true, I—I have thought that you sometimes took an unfair advantage of him at the cards; but not—oh, never, never for an instant—that he, with his eyes open, permitted you to do it, on account of—for—for— Oh, Daryl, not that, not that—not so bad as that!” I panted, shivering from head to foot. “Surely—surely, Daryl, you have not been so base—have not fallen so low as to allow—have not all along actually known——”

Once more my husband laughed out brutally ; a laugh cut short by a violent hiccough.

“ Oh, yes, I have,” he said, with something of his old jaunty air ; “ and so have you, you infernal hypocrite, Flower ! Who all along, I should like to hear, has known better than yourself that for love of you—for love of you, do you understand, Periwinkle, my dear ?—Leigh Eversleigh’s purse and his cheque-book have—”

“ Stop ! ” I cried, in a low authoritative voice—a strange hollow agonised voice most unlike my own. I released his arm mechanically. I shrank from him in loathing and disgust by far too deep for expression in speech ; my eyes, in a wild stare of horror, fixed upon the dark handsome dissolute face of the man who had dragged me down to this ; to this cruel, cruel depth of unspeakable degradation. Ah, me ! did it not verily seem as if my whole life was to be but one dreary record of shame and humiliation ?

My love—my once passionate and too-confiding love—for Daryl had been hitherto dying a gradual death ; slow, but sure enough, as I thought. And now it lay dead within my heart—bruised, shattered, utterly dead ; abruptly slain outright, I believed, by Daryl Darkwood himself. And yet, oh, how I had once loved

this man—how truly, how unselfishly had I once loved him !

“Don’t stare at me,” he cried roughly—“don’t stare at me—do you hear?—in that beastly theatrical fashion, you——”

As he hurled at me a coarse, foul epithet that never should pollute the hearing of any good and pure-souled woman, he thrust me—nay, struck me—from him with a blow upon my breast ; and the effort sent him rolling backward into his chair again.

I fell against the table in the centre of the room ; but happily was in no wise seriously hurt ; and soon, by the aid of it, I dragged myself upward to my feet. Nevertheless I felt much shaken and rather dizzy ; and the blood seemed to be rising from the region of my heart and surging with a humming noise over my brain.

Forlornly I threw back my head, with one hand covering my eyes. Slowly and blindly thus I groped my way towards the door.

“Good-bye, Daryl,” I said gently.

His head had sunk to his chest. His hands once more were rammed down into his pockets ; his legs were spread out in the old favourite attitude. As he did not answer, I paused upon the threshold to say “good-bye” again. The second

time I spoke more distinctly ; and then he heard me.

His reply was a curse muttered drowsily—that was all. So I noiselessly closed the sitting-room door and left him alone in his chair ; so left him for evermore !

Heavily—heavy in spirit—I went to the bedroom, where Isla was sleeping peacefully the sweet unhaunted sleep of guileless childhood. There by my darling's cot I dropped quietly to the floor ; and stretched my yearning arms over the little unconscious body.

But I could not yet pray for strength and guidance—not yet. I broke instead into a fit of helpless weeping ; and perhaps the rush of tears would ease my misery.

.
A few minutes after six o'clock Isla and I had left Miss Piper's house on the cliff. Not a soul was astir within it ; and but few were abroad outside ; for the dawn had been too ruddy to be the harbinger of fair weather, and the clouds now hung low and sullen over a stormily rolling sea. It was a fresh cold morning ; and rain perhaps would follow by-and-by.

The waves, mud-brown and dull green, broke with an angry hiss and roar at the base of the

breezy cliffs ; the fitful shafts of sunlight were white and watery, and struck slantwise out of heaven from behind the murkiest clouds. Soft-white also looked the screaming gulls, dipping to and wheeling around the tempestuous green water.

For one brief heart-bursting moment I halted at the drawing-room door. My breath suspended, I listened at the keyhole. Daryl, within the room, was snoring loudly, I could hear.

“Good-bye !” I murmured, for the third and for the last time. “Daryl, good-bye !”

Along the esplanade an adventuresome bather in flannels, towel in hand, was strolling down towards the sands. But there were no rickety landaus, no public conveyances of any kind anywhere in sight. Here and there an early maid-servant was engaged in cleaning her doorsteps ; stopping every now and then in her work to clutch her cap upon her head.

Whilst I was washing and dressing her, Isla asked no questions—to do so would be unlike her. But presently she remarked wistfully,—

“Aren’t we getting up rather early, mamma ?”

“Yes, my darling—earlier than we usually do,” I answered.

That was all then. Afterwards, when out of doors upon the pavement, she said,—

“And isn’t papa coming with us?”

“No, Isla.”

“Nor Mr. Eversleigh, mamma?”

“No, no, no, child—we are going alone.”

For a few seconds Isla remained silent, pondering the situation. Then she said thoughtfully,—

“Have we got enough luggage, do you think, mamma? Only this bag?”

“Enough for the present, darling,” I told her. I looked anxiously, but in vain, up and down the windy esplanade; and added, before she could speak again, “I don’t see any carriages about, Isla. It is too early, I suppose, for them. I wonder, dear, whether you could walk as far as the station?”

“Oh, yes, mamma—I can walk as far as the station, I’m sure!” said the little soul trustfully.

So we made our way towards the lower end of the town; the part of it where the station was situated; taking the back streets and meaner thoroughfares in order to avoid passing the “Black Stag” hotel.

At twenty-five minutes to seven we had reached Thangate station. About a dozen people or so—all men—were waiting upon the platform for the first swift train up to town.

I went to the booking-office; Isla clinging to my gown and taking care of the bag meanwhile.

“One and a half, third-class, to Victoria,” I said to the ticket-clerk; who looked cold, sour, and only partly awake. “Have we long to wait?”

“No—ten minutes. Train’s due here at 6·50.”

He slapped down the change and gave his attention to the next applicant, who, being a person who was going first-class, got more civility than had been accorded to me.

Fortunately the refreshment-room had just been opened; and there was time to buy a glass of milk and a stale sponge-cake for Isla. Then the rumble of the approaching train was heard; and we hastened out to take our seats.

The train—a long one—came slowly in; the engine hissing, passengers looking out of the windows; porters calling to one another and hurrying hither and thither. Then followed the usual groaning of wheels, the superfluous banging of doors; two or three rain-drops like big tears were dashed upon the carriage window-panes; and with a shriek we steamed out of the Than-gate station.

“And—and are we going back to London then, mamma?” asked Isla, in her small puzzled voice; and I answered wearily,—

“Yes, my darling, back to London. We have nowhere else to go!”



CHAPTER XXI.

NOT until nearly a month had gone by since my flight from Thangate and Daryl Darkwood could I arrive at any fixed determination with regard to my plans for the future.

But that I must be up and doing, for Isla's sake, I well enough knew ; must act—work ; must earn some money in one direction or another ; or else the just fate of all penniless idlers would assuredly overtake both me and my child, and we should starve.

Therefore something must be done ; and done, too, promptly ; it was imperative.

Not a shilling more than I reckoned to be absolutely needful had I carried away with me from my husband's purse. The money was not his—Daryl's. Ah, no—not his—not mine ! It was the money of—— I shuddered at the bare

thought. The memory, the knowledge of the shameful truth, was nothing short of an intolerable pain. For many days after I had fled from Thangate I felt crushed—simply crushed—with the sense of my own degradation. I could do naught but brood over my ruined life ; and weep vain tears for what was irrevocable.

Nevertheless, my meagre stock of money could not be made to last for ever ; and over and over again I told myself that something must be done.

The difficulty was to obtain work that would not take me away from Isla ; at any rate in the daytime. There indeed was the rub. Yet was there nothing that I could think of as being an at all likely means to the end I desired but what would necessitate a daily separation from my little delicate child ; and that was impossible—at least I would not have it so if any effort of mine could avert so real a calamity.

And so in the end it came about that, after a sore tussle with the cherished convictions, the most sensitive feelings—perhaps foolish prejudices—of my womanhood, I determined to write to Mr. Binkworthy. To do this would cost me not a little ; and yet, after all, who was I, I asked myself bitterly, that I should object to sing for the manager of the Levity ; particularly

now that to earn my daily bread—my own and my child's—had become a stern necessity of life?

Notwithstanding, in the first instance, I resolved to write to Miss de Vere. I asked the landlady, however, to be good enough to write the address upon the envelope; for the missive by mischance might fall under the notice of Daryl; and he would then, should he see it, of course recognise my handwriting.

So I wrote to Aurora Ramage, and begged her to come and see me. I sent the letter to Chesterfield Avenue, Shepherd's Bush—for the autumn was now well advanced, and Miss de Vere's engagement at the Dome-by-the-Waves must by this time have come to an end—and marked it "Strictly private." Her character was a staunch and a generous one. I knew that she was my friend, and could be trusted.

I had hidden myself in the neighbourhood of Primrose Hill; for quite by accident, some time before, I had heard a friend of Mrs. Ramage's say that furnished apartments were very cheap in the region lying north-west of Regent's Park. The park in itself too was a recommendation; Isla and I, there along its shady and often quite deserted walks, could wander, if fine, every day

of the week, and be troubled scarcely at all with a thought of our whereabouts being discovered. No one, unless given a clue, would dream of looking for us at Primrose Hill ; and London is at all times and in all circumstances the best hiding-place in the world.

I had found a dull, narrow, and rather hilly street—in fact it was nothing more than a blind road ; for it ended unexpectedly in a high and dreadful-looking brick wall, suggestive, I used to think, of a prison-yard—which branched off from a better and a much cheerfuller street, where there were numerous shops and several public-houses. This dull blind road where I had found a lodging was called Bentham Street ; and my landlady's house was the first that one came to in it—the first, I remember, upon the right-hand side.

Mrs. Sadler was a weary-looking, untidy widow ; and two grown-up sons lived at home with their mother. One was a watchmaker, and worked near home ; the other was a booking-clerk on the Underground Railway ; and Mrs. Sadler lived in perpetual daily dread lest either or both of the young men should one day marry and go away from her and Bentham Street. Life, as it was, was a hard enough struggle for Mrs. Sadler ; but

without her lodgers and her grown-up sons it would be a desperate battle indeed.

The house was shabbily furnished and not in any wise remarkable for cleanliness; but I had got Mrs. Sadler's "dining-room" floor—a stuffy back bedroom and a front sitting-room opening into each other with folding-doors—for fourteen-and-sixpence a week, including gas and attendance; and so I must not grumble, I told myself, over trifles.

At the outset I had deemed it best to tell the plain truth; and therefore I informed my landlady that I was a woman who was separated from her husband. But Mrs. Sadler evinced not the slightest astonishment. She merely nodded, sighed, and said—"How sad! It often happened so;" and never in my hearing alluded to the matter again.

The day on which I expected Aurora Ramage to call in Bentham Street—for Miss de Vere had written me a hurried scrawl to the effect that she would answer my letter in person—was a gray and chilly October one. The colours of the trees in the neighbourhood of Primrose Hill were changing visibly day by day; soon would our favourite walks in the park be all thickly strewn with brown and yellow leaves which now dropped

sadly earthward through the moist and silent air. And the early morning now dawned always in mist; dull-gray evening mists heralded the cold night shadows. The London sparrows shivered upon the damp and dripping boughs; and looked as if they were dismally aware that bleak winter and its hardships were near.

For my own part, I never can see the beauty of an autumn day; not even when the sun shines in a clear sky and the trees are richest in their wondrous tints. In spite of the sunlight there is sadness in the air; and to me Mother Earth seems melancholy and subdued at the prospect of her own decay. Spring is like youth—autumn like middle-age; and at middle-age one feels that the grave is within sight. Then comes cold winter, which is as dark death; and “our little life, rounded with a sleep,” is gone!

To welcome Miss de Vere I had a nice cheerful fire burning in my dingy sitting-room, which made it appear quite cosy; and the tray and tea-things were all ready upon the round table drawn near to the hearth. In the morning I and Isla had gone out as usual, and had bought a new Bristol cake, and a bottle of port at a good wine-merchant's, and also, at a florist's, a few autumn flowers wherewith to soften the gaudy

glass vases which adorned the sham marble mantelpiece. Aurora had promised to be in Bentham Street at half-past four o'clock; and shrewd and practical people like Miss de Vere generally contrive to be punctual in keeping an appointment.

"And will papa come with Miss de Vere?" asked Isla.

"No, Isla."

"Nor not Mr. Eversleigh, mamma?" said she more wistfully still.

"Oh, Isla," said I, catching the little fragile soul to my breast, "you must not ask so many questions! You have mamma, you know; and—and for the present, my darling, you must be satisfied with—with all the love that she is able to give you."

It was sometimes for me the most difficult matter conceivable to answer the child's questions in a way that would really quiet her. She was for ever almost plaintively asking why papa and Mr. Eversleigh did not come; and for hours at a stretch she would stand at the dull windows, just as she used to do at Thangate, patiently watching for the coming of Leigh.

She was at the window, standing, as was her wont, upon a hassock, this afternoon; now watch-

ing for the arrival of Miss de Vere. Perhaps Isla's soul was gladdened with some vague unlikely notion that Mr. Eversleigh might accompany Mrs. Ramage's daughter.

It was about three minutes to the half-hour after four when a hansom rattled up to Mrs. Sadler's door. Out of it, comfortably clad in her furs, briskly stepped Aurora. A few moments later she was with us in the passage; affectionately embracing my child and me.





CHAPTER XXII.

WELL, Mrs. Darkwood," observed Aurora, in her old straightforward manner and with her old friendly smile, "this is a pretty state of affairs—you would be shocked, I suppose, if I called it 'a rum kettle of fish' ?—upon my word it is ! I never was more sorry in my life than when I heard of the miserable split between you and Mr. Darkwood. I do sincerely trust however," added the girl earnestly, "that things are not past mending ? Do not tell me that."

"They are wholly past mending," I answered, in a gloomy and an emphatic tone. "What does my husband say of me ? Let me hear, please, Aurora."

For some seconds she was silent, staring into the fender.

"Well," she said at last, "of course what he says now—and—and perhaps it is hardly to be wondered at—he says under a sense of—I won't

call it injury ; but anger and intense annoyance——”

“ Whatever he says,” I put in bitterly, “ depend upon it, he means. No one knows him better than I ; you may believe that, Aurora. Come, tell me ; will you ? Does he swear that he will find me and force me to return to him ? ”

“ On the contrary,” replied the girl frankly, but laughing with some constraint, as she took from the mantelpiece a small Japanese hand-screen and held it between her face and the fire, “ he says that—that you may go to the deuce for aught he cares ; if you want plain speaking, Mrs. Darkwood. But, as I remarked just now, it’s his temper of course. Men are such odd creatures ; and at times such brutes ! All the same, I am sure that he doesn’t really mean it.”

“ Oh, yes,” said I quietly ; “ that is precisely what he does mean ! If he did not mean it, he would not say it. And I am glad to hear it—very glad indeed.”

“ Glad, Mrs. Darkwood ? ” echoed Aurora. “ Oh, no ! ”

“ Yes—heartily, positively glad ; for now I know what to expect ; and am not afraid. I shall feel more at ease—more secure, as it were—now that I am certain I can go my own way,

and that he will not molest me. We are best apart—my husband and I—for ever apart. This separation was inevitable. For a long while past I have foreseen that it must happen ; and it is entirely his own fault—not mine.”

“H’m ! Of course you best understand your own affairs,” said Aurora slowly and kindly.

She had taken off her out-door things and had drawn her chair near to the fire. She looked very handsome and very well, as she sat there opposite to me, thoughtfully playing with the trumpery hand-screen, and with her neatly-shod feet upon the fender. Her fair hair was arranged in a new and somewhat eccentric style ; but it was a style which was admirably suited to her healthy, bright good looks. Isla I had sent downstairs to “help Mrs. Sadler make the tea ;” for Miss de Vere, with a queer smile, had suggested that “little pitchers have long ears.”

Meanwhile Aurora chatted leisurely on ; and I heard a good deal that was news to me about Daryl. Oh, yes, said Miss de Vere, he was back again with them—the Ramages—at Chesterfield Avenue ; in fact, he had quickly followed them home from Thangate ; but Mr. Eversleigh—with, I felt, a furtive glance across at me—never now came to the house. She believed—her mother

said so—that the two men had quarrelled, and were no longer intimate. Aurora herself thought that it was far from unlikely; but was not at all certain upon the point. Latterly, said the girl, a horrid foreigner, a German, Herr von Rosenberg his name—her mother always called him the Baron—had been much in the society of Daryl. Indeed, he and this Herr von Rosenberg appeared to be inseparable friends; and the Baron was for ever coming—just as Mr. Eversleigh used to do, only there was a difference—to their house in Chesterfield Avenue. They were always card-playing, and got very tipsy sometimes; the German not infrequently being “taken home” in a cab, for the simple reason that he was unable to walk a step. On these ultra-disgraceful occasions Mrs. Ramage, it would seem, had noticed that “the Captain” himself remained perfectly sober; or nearly so. The Ramage thought this odd; but I understood.

“To speak the truth,” said Aurora frankly, “if my mother were not so absurdly fond of your husband, Mrs. Darkwood—she says she loves him like a son; takes his part against you, there is no doubt; and nobody understands better than he how to get the blind side of her—I should beg her to request him to find lodgings else-

where for the accommodation of himself and his friends. The place is unbearable with their everlasting drinking and cards; and that shock-headed German fellow smokes like—like a chimney!”

“I know he does,” I threw in with a shudder. “We knew him abroad. For many reasons I used to detest the man!”

“I hate him!” with energy said Aurora. “There is, to my thinking, something downright abominable about the wretch. The other day he snatched me into his arms—we happened to meet upon the stairs—and kissed me before I had a chance to stop him. But—my word, Mrs. Darkwood!—I took him such a ringing slap on the face directly afterwards that I fancy he won’t forget it just yet; nor be in a hurry to try it on again!”

I smiled involuntarily.

“Nothing that you can tell me about Herr von Rosenberg would astonish me, Aurora,” said I; and then I inquired quite steadily if she knew whether Mr. Eversleigh was in town or out of it.

She eyed me in a rather curious and puzzled manner.

“Mrs. Darkwood, do you mean to say that you too have seen nothing of Mr. Eversleigh lately?”

“Certainly I have not seen him since we—Isla and I—left Thangate,” I replied coldly.

“And he does not know where you are even?”

“Certainly he does not know where I am”—
my tone, I believe, unconsciously haughty.
“How should he?”

Aurora shrugged her firm square shoulders.

“It is a queer state of affairs,” she said slowly ;
adding, after a slight pause—“Are you sure,
Mrs. Darkwood, that jealousy had nothing to do
with it all?”

“Jealousy!” I echoed. “Jealousy on my
husband’s part, do you mean?”

“Yes;” answered the girl boldly. “He was
jealous perhaps of Mr. Eversleigh.”

I laughed scornfully.

“My dear Aurora, your notion of the matter
is too ridiculous. My husband has long since
ceased to care a straw for me; he never really
cared for the child—indeed I am convinced that
he always looked upon Isla more in the light of
a nuisance than anything else. Men like Daryl
never really love children. He may have feigned
a jealous humour—I do not know, nor do I care
now—tried to act the jealous husband; but that
was absurd in the face of the truth; for Heaven
knows I never was weak or wicked enough to
give him the slightest excuse for assuming such
a rôle! I grant you that he—he did openly

accuse me of—of—well, of possessing a conscience as facile as his own, a knowledge of circumstances as evil as his own. But I am innocent, Aurora—I swear it! Never for an instant did I dream,” said I passionately, “that—that—” I checked myself. My indignation was hurrying me into unwise speech. “No,” I said more quietly; “Daryl Darkwood wanted to be rid of me; he literally drove me from him, not without blows and horrid language; and he has succeeded perfectly in his aim. I feel that I would rather die, Aurora, than ever go back to him. He has treated me shamefully!”

“I think it is a pity,” she answered gravely, “that Mr. Eversleigh should be in ignorance of your hiding-place. He is so true a gentleman that he might, if you would only let him hear—”

I held up my hand. It shook a little.

“You go from the point. We were not speaking of Mr. Eversleigh—he is nothing to me,” I interrupted as gently as I could; yet conscious as I spoke of a dull pain, born perhaps of yearning and regret, fluttering in my bosom. “Daryl and Daryl’s friends are alike dead to me now.”

“Ah, well, as I observed a minute ago,” mused Miss de Vere aloud, “you best comprehend your own affairs, Mrs. Darkwood; and it is always a

foolish thing to in any wise interfere between husband and wife."

"That is true," said I, in a low sad voice.

Here Mrs. Sadler and Isla appeared together; the former bringing with her the teapot, a jug of steaming water, and a covered plate of muffins and crumpets; Isla, in her wee shy fashion, clinging to Mrs. Sadler's rusty black skirt. Miss de Vere had brought the child a present in the shape of a smart new doll; and the doll, flaxen head downward, was now being hugged to Isla's breast.

"Come here, my pet," cried Aurora, deftly whisking Isla on to her knee. "What a feather-weight it is, to be sure! Now that the lamp is lighted, let me have a good look at you. Why, what have you done with your Thangate roses?"

"I don't know," said Isla softly.

"I hope you do not think that—that she is looking delicate?" I hastened to say.

"Oh, no," Aurora was quick to reply—"not more so than usual! But the Thangate breezes blew some colour into her cheeks, and the London fogs, I suppose, have managed to rob them of it—that is all!"

"It is considered very healthy just hereabout—for—for London, you know," said I anxiously.

"Oh, a lot healthier than Shepherd's Bush; isn't

it, Isla?" said Aurora, laughing, and kissing the child heartily before she set her upon her feet again.

When tea was over, I once more told Isla that she had better run along downstairs—if the landlady would be kind enough to have her in the kitchen—this time "to help Mrs. Sadler wash up the tea-things." And the little one, ever docile and obedient, trotted contentedly off with her doll.

In answer to my earnest interrogation—already, I think, in a different manner, three or four times repeated—Aurora most emphatically assured me that no living soul save herself was aware that she had on that afternoon driven over to Primrose Hill.

"Not even your mother? You have not told her?" I said nervously. As circumstances were at present, I was far from desirous, much as I liked and respected her, to see Mrs. Ramage in Bentham Street; though I was sincerely pleased and truly thankful to see her daughter there.

"My mother, good soul—indeed not her! One might as well at once print a secret in the agony column of a newspaper. Why, Mrs. Darkwood, cannot you trust me?" said Aurora, with a hurt look. "You asked me to keep to myself the fact of your having written to me, of your having told me where you were; and, do believe me, the

confidence you have been good enough to place in me could not be more thoroughly respected than it is."

"Thank you," I murmured a trifle wearily. "I am ungrateful and mean to doubt you. You have been so very, very kind to me—a true friend!"

"Pooh!" said Miss de Vere. Then she, in her own matter-of-fact manner, went on to inquire whether I and the child were not in want of the divers articles of apparel which we had left behind us at Thangate? How on earth had we managed? The clothes were quite safe, Aurora said; for Daryl, it appeared, had gone straightway to Mrs. Ramage, and had asked her to have the friendliness to look after and to pack up everything that belonged to me and Isla. He did not understand the job, he said; and he wanted "the litter" collected and got out of the way directly.

Of course Mrs. Ramage promptly obliged him; and she had ever since taken care of the yellow tin trunks which contained Isla's belongings and mine. I confessed to Aurora that I had been somewhat in a quandary for the want of the luggage; but that, with economy in other directions, I had been able to buy sundry necessities both for Isla and for myself. We had rubbed along somehow.

“Nevertheless,” said Miss de Vere briskly, “if you don’t mean to return to Chesterfield Avenue—and that, it seems, is to be the programme—you would naturally like to have with you here all that belongs to yourself and to the child ; would you not ?”

I said that indeed I should ; but that I could not yet perceive how it was to be accomplished.

“Leave it to me,” said Miss de Vere. “I will manage it, Mrs. Darkwood.”

“But pray do not forget your mother,” I put in doubtfully. “Not for the world would I have her learn—”

“Oh, I will manage her too !” confidently said Aurora. “Do not fear.”

I thanked her warmly for her sympathy and goodwill ; and now the moment was come for me to broach a far more serious matter. So in a few words I informed Aurora that—supposing Mr. Binkworthy were still in the same mind about offering me an engagement—I had resolved to sing for him at his theatre of varieties.

Miss de Vere was genuinely astonished. She said so ; and she looked so. Evidently this was the first she had heard of the proposal the manager had made to me.

“Good gracious !” exclaimed she. “And you

mean to say, Mrs. Darkwood, that you will actually do it—will sing for Binkworthy at the Levity ?”

“Yes ; my mind is made up. I want money badly.”

For some seconds Aurora kept quiet ; manifestly pondering my determination.

“I am afraid—I am very much afraid, Mrs. Darkwood dear, that—that you will not at all like it,” said she vaguely at last ; with a kind and rather troubled glance into my face.

“That cannot be helped,” I answered doggedly. “I shall not be the first woman by a good many who has had to do work that she loathed.”

“But—but is there no other way in which you can earn money ?” said Miss de Vere anxiously. “Surely yes ?”

“There is no other way in which I can get money so easily, or that would leave me so free in the day—no other work for which I should be so liberally paid ; I have thought of everything. Mr. Binkworthy offered me twenty-five pounds a-week to begin with : that was, to sing three ballads for him on each evening of the week, but for nobody else in London.”

“H’m—that is pretty good for a new hand, you know !” observed Aurora reflectively. “But

then it isn't one novice in a thousand that is blessed with such a lovely trained voice as yours."

"But I little conceived that the dark day was so near when I should be glad to reconsider Mr. Binkworthy's strange offer," I said, in an absent and a bitter tone; my thoughts going vividly back to that evening of Mrs. Ramage's Thangate festival, when the manager of the Levity had come out to me upon the balcony, suggesting that so fine and cultivated a voice as mine should be turned to substantial account.

"Of course you will not sing under your own name?" said Aurora slowly.

"No; I thought of calling myself Madame Fleurette. I know a number of *chansonnettes* that may come in handy for a change occasionally—for an *encore* perhaps—and an average British audience, looking very wise, will always flock to hear and listen respectfully to what it does not understand."

"And is 'Fleurette,' then, the French word for 'Flower'?" inquired Aurora curiously.

"Not exactly. The name would suit Isla better than me; but it will serve. And no one will dream that it is I—that it is Daryl Darkwood's wife who, as Madame Fleurette, is singing ballads nightly at the Levity theatre of varieties."

“Ah, but your friends, my dear Mrs. Darkwood,” said Aurora gravely—“and I know the life ; you do not—what will they say to this step you contemplate ? How will they take it ?”

“Friends—what friends ? I have no friends now ; except you, Aurora,” replied I, with a dreary smile.

“Pardon me, I know better than that,” replied the girl simply and earnestly. “There is——”

“My husband now does not care for theatres, whatever his taste in that way may have been when he was younger ; never of his own accord troubles to enter a place of the kind,” I interrupted hurriedly ; and perhaps somewhat at random. “He will not interfere with me. There is no one else. You have given me your word—and I fully trust you—that you will keep my secret. I shall likewise insist upon a promise of secrecy from Mr. Binkworthy before—before I come to any sort of arrangement with him. For the future, to Mr. Binkworthy, should he still be willing to employ me, I shall be Madame Fleurette—never Mrs. Darkwood.”

Aurora could be very daring when she chose. So, in her quietest and most deliberate fashion, she said,—

“Now let us suppose some night that Mr.

Eversleigh should stroll into a stall at the Levity, and should recognise you—you, of all people—facing the bold glare of the footlights. How then, Madame Fleurette?"

And, so saying, she laughed pleasantly, if a little mischievously. I, I believe, winced palpably. This time however there was no evading a direct reply.

"It would—it could make no difference. Why should it?" I said, in nervous haste. "If my own husband—my lawful protector—casts me adrift, surely I am at perfect liberty to earn my living in whatsoever manner suits me best? It may be this—it may be that. It is no business of his—of Mr. Eversleigh's—no one has a right to object." I resolutely turned the current of the talk. "If," said I wistfully, "I should be engaged to sing at the Levity, we shall meet there, Aurora, every evening, shall we not? That, at any rate, will be something consolatory to look forward to."

Then a bright dimpling smile broke over Aurora's face; and a sudden blush suffused it. "Oh, yes, we are pretty safe to meet, Mrs. Darkwood; and that will indeed be delightful. I am generally at the theatre soon after nine o'clock," she said. "But you must know," added Aurora,

nodding gaily, "I shall shortly, in a few weeks or so, be leaving the stage—giving it up for good. Lord Tracy, you see, wishes it; and of course it is my duty to humour his lordship. We are to be married in February, at the latest."

My heart sank. Mr. Binkworthy's theatre without Aurora would for me be a terrible place, I was thinking! The fact of her being a member of his company—a friend there whose help and whose sensible advice I, in a difficult and strange position, might at any time safely reckon upon—had materially, I fancy, affected my decision with regard to the manager and his offer. Well, there was no help for it. My hand once put to the plough, there would be no turning back. The battle of life must be manfully faced—ay, faced even alone—and fought without quailing to the bitter end!

The cheap wooden clock upon the mantelpiece of my sitting-room tinkled out eight; eight swift shrill strokes, after the manner of cheap wooden clocks; and Miss de Vere sprang up from the fireside, avowing that she had no idea it had grown so late. She must be going. She had promised to meet Lord Tracy at the Café Reine in Regent Street, whence, as he usually did, he would drive her in his brougham to the Levity;

where, like a good and dutiful young man in love, he invariably waited in a stage-box until Miss de Vere had "done her turn."

"Loftus will be in a fume"—Loftus was the first of the young Viscount's Christian names; he had at baptism been given half-a-dozen—"if I am not punctual," said Aurora, as she went into the bedroom to get her handsome wraps. "He's the most impatient young man alive when he is obliged to wait for me," added she.

"I consider him a very fortunate young man to get you at all," said I warmly.

"The Countess of Starch, I hear, holds a vastly different opinion," remarked Aurora, with a laugh of real merriment. "She goes about groaning and telling everybody she knows in town and in the country that she will assuredly die of a broken heart—and Loftus says his mother is as strong as a cart-horse and never has known an hour's illness in his recollection—on the day that her son marries 'that creature from the music-halls.' That's me, you know. But hearts are not broken quite so easily, Mrs. Darkwood; are they?"

"Ah, no!" said I gently. "One's heart, I am inclined to believe, is the toughest part about one."

We heard Isla climbing the kitchen-stairs to say good-bye to Miss de Vere. Aurora abruptly

turned to me, her colour rising brilliantly. She put her hands upon my shoulders, and whispered hurriedly,—

“Don’t be angry, Mrs. Darkwood, please—please don’t feel angry and offended with me—but I must, even at the risk of seeming impertinent, say something before I go. You have told me that you are in want of money; that must not be. I can very well spare a ten-pound note—two if you want them. So take them, please, and repay me just whenever you can best afford to do it. Do!”

I kissed her; with difficulty keeping back my tears.

“You are too good—you are too good!” I murmured. “But I have enough for the present. I can manage; and—and I would rather not. Forgive me, dear Aurora, I would indeed rather not.”

“I should be so happy if you would,” said she; and she meant it.

“No, no, no; I cannot! Thank you, and God bless you, all the same!” was my earnest, tearful reply. Her true warm-heartedness touched me keenly.

Then Isla came in with her doll; and Miss de Vere turned brightly to the child.

I pressed Aurora to take a second glass of wine and another piece of the Bristol cake ; but she excused herself upon the plea that she would be compelled to join Lord Tracy in some "coffee or something" when she should meet him by-and-by at the Café Reine.

"Good-bye, my pet," she was saying to Isla. Mrs. Sadler had run round the corner and fetched a hansom for Miss de Vere. "I shall see you and mamma again very soon, I have no doubt. In the meantime, little woman," added Aurora playfully, "try and get back your Thangate roses. Mind, I shall quite expect to see them in full bloom the very next time I come."

"What are Thangate roses, mamma?" asked the child wonderingly, when Aurora had driven away.

"They are not white, my dearest. They are bright, beautiful red ones ; and—and they mean health and strength," I answered miserably ; holding the dear little thin hand against my throat.

"But I like white ones—white flowers—best, mamma," said Isla, with a serious and puzzled air.

And that night I dreamed restlessly of the dead-white roses that now bloomed so wanly in my darling's cheeks.



CHAPTER XXIII.

WITHIN the next few days three or four circumstances had come to pass which I can very distinctly recall to mind ; and which I therefore think are worth chronicling in this eventful history.

My trunks had arrived from Chesterfield Avenue ; carefully forwarded by Miss de Vere. I had hired a piano from a neighbouring music-shop, where I had also bought clean copies of the numerous best-known ballads I could sing. Indefatigable practice must be now an absolute rule ; for a singer who would sing successfully must cherish her voice, I knew ; cherish it, and yet exercise it rigorously and patiently.

Then Mrs. Sadler was considerably more cheerful than it was her habit to be ; and consequently it was more pleasant and less depressing to have anything to do with her. In her dull tired way she rejoiced exceedingly ; for

after its remaining untenanted for many months gone by—and she was now “full,” as she expressed it—she had at last succeeded in again letting her attic-floor; two dim small rooms at the top of the house, the rent of which was not more than seven shillings a week.

“For, you see,” said Mrs. Sadler, in an apologetic manner, “they slant a bit and are rather low; and there’s no grate in the back room, and not much of a one in the front; and so you can’t, with a good conscience, ask more, when the chimbley smokes frightful in a east wind.”

“And who is your new lodger, Mrs. Sadler?” I inquired; wishing to be sympathetic.

“Well, ma’am, his name’s Jones; and he looks like a pore broken-down old gent as has known better days—I may say like me. He is very shabby to look at; and seems very shy; but he’s nice and quiet spoken when he does speak, and promises that I may rest satisfied that he’ll pay up regular—and that of course is something. And so, as he gives hardly any trouble worth mentioning, and gets what meals he has out of the house, not counting his breakfast, I’m sure I oughtn’t to complain.”

And gradually we got to speak of the shadowy and inoffensive old gentleman at the top of the

house as "old Mr. Jones"—always as "old Mr. Jones." I myself had not once yet encountered the new lodger; but Isla, trotting hither and thither indoors, had already, in her coy way, made friends with old Mr. Jones.

One day, as I sat at the piano, she crept to my side, holding out a box of chocolate-creams.

"Look, mamma! He gave me these," said she. "Isn't he kind?"

"Who gave them to you, Isla?" I asked in surprise; for it was a large handsome box, bearing upon the lid of it a name that in itself was a guarantee of excellence, and must have cost at the least two shillings or half-a-crown.

"Old Mr. Jones, mamma," answered the child.

"Strange!" I muttered; quite believing that the old gentleman at the top of the house could ill afford to throw away his money in this extravagant fashion. Perhaps he was not so poor as Mrs. Sadler imagined; or perhaps he was a miser, though fond of little children?

"Mr. Eversleigh," remarked Isla wistfully, lovingly gazing into the pretty oval box, with its edgings of dainty paper-lace and layers of big luscious brown sweetmeats, "used to give me chocolate-creams—just like these. Didn't he, mamma? I wonder——"

“Yes, yes, dear,” I said hastily. “But you must be quiet now. Sit down upon the hassock by the fire, Isla; mamma is going to sing, and cannot be interrupted at this moment, dear.”

By this date everything with regard to my new career was satisfactorily settled with Mr. Binkworthy. I was to make my first appearance—“my first appearance on any stage”—at the Levity theatre at the beginning of the coming week. At our initial interview the manager was radiant; took no pains to conceal his delight; was, in fact, too, so to speak, bursting with curiosity.

But I checked at once all inquiries that were not strictly pertinent; said exactly what I wanted to say; and emphatically gave Mr. Binkworthy to understand that all questions irrelevant to the purpose of my visit to him were—not only then, but thenceforward—to be kept in the background. I was mistress of the situation, I could perceive.

“Let us get to the point, Mr. Binkworthy, if you please,” I said quietly. “Surely you can comprehend the state of affairs? I and my husband have parted. He for the future goes his way; I go mine. It is necessary for me to work for myself and my child. Therefore, remember-

ing what you said to me at Thangate, I have come, in a hard strait, to you."

"And nobody in London or out of it could be welcomer, Mrs. Darkw—I beg pardon—Madame Fleurette," said the manager; with something curiously like a wink at me. He was in great good-humour over his own victory and my capitulation; and alternately rattled the money in his pockets and jingled his prodigious watch-chain and locket, with a thoroughly well-to-do and self-satisfied air.

"And how about those pretty and high-sounding notions of yours, madame, as to women a-going on the stage—eh? *Nous avery shong-say toos-a-la!* Is that it?" added Mr. Binkworthy; with a sudden and bewildering flight into "French."

"My opinion upon the subject remains unchanged," I replied coldly. "It is true that I have consented to sing for you at the Levity, three songs on each evening, and occasionally at a *matinée* on Saturday, for a salary of twenty-five pounds a week. But, at the same time, be good enough to recollect that it is 'my poverty' and not 'my will' which consents."

"And I'll give you a rise at the end of a month or so, if you take, and take well, with my

audience, Mrs. Dar—Madame Fleurette,” put in the manager eagerly.

“Thank you. By-the-bye, I should feel much obliged if you would always, now, remember to call me Madame Fleurette. I don’t wish my real name to be in every one’s mouth here at your theatre, Mr. Binkworthy.”

“I will remember, madame,” said the manager, with his finest bow. “Of course I shall want you to sign an agreement—it’s a mere matter o’ form—but that I’ll send to you in a day or two.”

So the business was settled, and I returned home, wondering heavily how I should ever find the courage to face the ordeal that was in store for me. At present I could not realise what I had done. I felt almost like a woman who had “signed away her soul.” Even when Miss de Vere looked in one morning to tell me that my stage-name, in scarlet letters a foot long, was flaming upon the boards outside the Levity doors, I somehow could not feel that the dreaded hour was drawing horribly near. Nevertheless with the utmost diligence, regularly every day when breakfast was over did I set to work to practise my songs and *chansonnettes*; common sense telling me that there was now no escape

from the course I had elected to pursue ; it was too late. There was no turning back.

“ Oh, by-the-way,” said Aurora that morning, “ I met such a singular but courteous old gentleman upon the door-step ! We came in together ; and he shuffled on upstairs. I never before saw such a sad and shadowy-looking old gentleman. Who is he, Mrs Darkwood ; do you know ? ”

I told Aurora about the tenant in the attics ; how poor he seemed, and yet how kind-hearted ; this new odd lodger of Mrs. Sadler's, with his two dim little rooms under the roof.

“ It is only old Mr. Jones,” said I.





CHAPTER XXIV.

IT had to be ; and it came.

The night of my *début* arrived all too swiftly ; and the memory of it is a memory that will never die—at least, so long as life shall last for me, until pleasure and pain alike for me shall be no more.

On the memorable night I put Isla early to bed—for, luckily, the child seemed sleepy and tired—and I asked Mrs. Sadler to be good enough in my absence to step now and again into the bedroom to peep at her whilst she was asleep.

And then I dressed myself in a plain black gown—one of the plainest and severest-looking I possessed—adorned but niggardly with real white lace at the throat and wrists, and sat down by Isla's cot to wait for Miss de Vere. It had between us been arranged that Aurora should

drive over in a cab and call for me—it was her own kind suggestion, in the first instance—in order that we might go down to the Levity together.

“And will you be going out like this every evening, mamma?” had inquired Isla wistfully after tea.

“Yes, my darling,” I had answered as cheerfully as I could—“every evening. It is—it is necessary, Isla. It must be done, dear. You shall learn the meaning of the word ‘duty’ by-and-by, when you are older, Isla. It is a very stern and cruel word sometimes. But—but my little girl does not—does not mind mamma’s going, does she?”

“No; I do not mind, mamma!” said the little soul bravely.

“Besides, I—I shall not be long away, dear, and you will not be alone, you know. Mrs. Sadler will be at home; and—and—”

“And old Mr. Jones?” put in Isla, brightening.

“Yes, old Mr. Jones,” said I, smiling. “He, I dare say, will be at home too. He generally is of an evening.”

“I like old Mr. Jones,” said Isla thoughtfully. “Don’t you, mamma?”

“Very much, Isla. He is, I think, a—a very nice old gentleman. And a remarkably odd old gentleman, into the bargain,” I added to myself.

Isla and old Mr. Jones, who lived his solitary life in the two small attics under the roof, had become fast friends. He was continually giving her sweetmeats and other presents; and promising her all sorts of wonderful things “when his ship came home.” On two occasions he had given her a really handsome toy. Much as it troubled me to think that he should do this—feeling certain that the shabby old gentleman was in pocket too poor to afford such a lavish indulgence of his whims—I was quite at a loss to know how to put a stop to it. And so it went on. And of course Isla herself did not mind; and one day, indeed, when he gently asked for it, she actually gave him a kiss!

He was always however strangely chary of speaking to me. Nothing beyond “good morning,” “good afternoon,” or “good evening,” muttered hurriedly on his part, had ever passed between us. If we met in the passage or upon the door-step he seemed all at once to grow singularly shy and nervous; half-frightened, in

fact, lest I should be bent upon drawing him into conversation. And yet, on the other hand, it certainly did not appear that he made the least effort to avoid me; for we were constantly meeting in the chance manner I have described. I once tried, encountering him in the passage, to thank him for his kindness to my little daughter; intending, should he give me only the opportunity, to say something about his having already been too good; that his generosity must be taxed no further; and that I could not possibly allow the child to accept anything more from him, because, as it was, he had given her a great deal too much.

But it was of no use. Before I could utter two words on the matter, he had managed, but without rudeness, to shuffle past me, muttering something I could not catch and shaking his head deprecatingly; and so, leaving me staring after him, he vanished up the dingy staircase to his rooms at the top of the house.

And on the very next day he found Isla in the kitchen and gave her a larger box than ever of chocolate-creams. Certainly he was a mysterious old gentleman, this old Mr. Jones, thought I.

At half-past eight o'clock Aurora Ramage

arrived ; beautifully dressed in the palest of maize-coloured satin ; with a crimson girdle, and a lovely fan attached to it, around her waist, and a mass of living crimson flowers garlanding her left shoulder and breast. A single diamond star burned in her fair hair. With a comical smile she glanced at my severe attire ; and said,—

“ You are not very smart, Madame Fleurette ! ”

“ I did not mean to be smart, Aurora. I told you I should wear a black gown. I shall always wear black when I sing on the stage.”

“ H’m—that will be a change for ’em,” laughed Aurora—“ at all events, at the Levity.”

“ If they do not like it, I cannot help it. Perhaps they will hiss me,” said I.

“ Oh, you would go down—never fear,” said the girl frankly—“ if you chose to sing in a sack ! We don’t often, believe me, get such a voice, together with such a face and style as yours, Mrs. Darkwood, at our theatre of varieties. Binkworthy knows that—nobody better—and he will say nothing, you may be sure, whatever he may think.”

She made me, before starting, drink a glass of wine, and blithely tossed off one herself ; and soon we were rolling away from the neighbourhood of Primrose Hill and Regent’s Park and had

got into the Marylebone Road. A sudden cold thought struck me.

"Lord Tracy will be there to-night?" I exclaimed.

"At the theatre? Of course he will," replied Aurora equably.

"And to-morrow he will be going all over London and telling everybody he knows that in Madame Fleurette, the new ballad-singer at the Levity, he has recognised Daryl Darkwood's wife!"

In the lamp-lit gloom of the cab I gazed helplessly at Aurora.

"Oh, no, he won't!" observed she calmly. "He'll do exactly as I tell him—he always does."

"Has he no idea who Madame Fleurette is?"

"At the present moment no more than my mother; who yet also knows that Binkworthy has a new singer coming out at his theatre to-night. But have no fear of my mother's tongue, Mrs. Darkwood—she'll not be there to see you; she's too busy at home."

I sighed with relief.

"She used to come and hear me when I first took to the stage," continued Aurora; "but

latterly she has had no time for it—with a houseful of lodgers, you see.”

Aurora chatted lightly on, good-naturedly desirous to hinder my thoughts from too nervously dwelling upon that evening’s trial; expecting—and in truth getting—but poor replies from me. Notwithstanding, I was sincerely grateful to her for her efforts to alleviate the feverish anxiety of my mind. I quite believe that, had it not been for Aurora, I should have felt downright sick with apprehension.

The three songs I had chosen for this, the night of my *début*, were “Ruby,” “It was a Dream,” and “Auld Robin Gray.” To the last-named of the three—as Mr. Binkworthy desired it—I was to play my own accompaniment upon the stage grand piano. The rehearsal I had attended had been a very informal affair; for the Levity orchestra was a capital one of its kind, and the pianist of it was a true musician. Such accompaniments as mine were of course mere child’s play.

The cab stopped; we had arrived at the stage-door.

“Cheer up!” said Aurora merrily—God bless her!

Mr. Binkworthy was awaiting us in the dim

white-washed passage ; and took us at once to his own sanctum. I was nervous—I own it—horribly nervous. The manager himself was fussily so ; at the eleventh hour fearful of his *débutante's* “ pluck,” as he called it ; lest, after all his preliminary puffing and big posters, she should fail to create the sensation he had predicted.

I have a hazy recollection of many strange faces peeping at us curiously from unexpected corners ; of scantily-clad forms flitting hither and thither ; of carpenters in shirt-sleeves ; of a good deal of noise ; and of the band playing somewhere or other in a muffled sort of way. Soon I heard a woman say, in coarse excited accents,—

“ That's her ! ”

And another responded quickly with,—

“ Oh, so she's come with Miss de Vere ! ”

“ The Viscountess Stuck-up you mean ! ” venomously said the person in fleshings who had exclaimed “ That's her ! ”

Once in his room, the stout manager waxed profuse in hospitable suggestions ; and was pouring out glasses of champagne before we could stay his hand. Aurora, with relish, was just sipping hers, when a sharp rap came upon the

door. It opened a couple of inches, and a youthful voice sang out,—

“Miss de Vere!”

“My turn,” observed Aurora, briskly rising and picking up her handsome yellow train. But before she quitted the manager’s room she stooped and kissed my hair. “Be brave,” whispered she —“for Isla’s sake!”

And to those few cheery and timely words of encouragement, all hastily spoken as they were, was solely due the great success which I achieved at the Levity that night. Without Aurora I well know now that I never could have done what I did. No wonder that I cried in my heart, “God bless her!”

“I thought that it would be safest as you should take your turn immediately after Miss de Vere,” I heard, as in a dream, Mr. Binkworthy saying to me; “because that girl has got the knack of always putting an audience into the best of humours. A wonderful clever one, and no mistake, is Miss Aurora de Vere—as true as steel, and no humbug about her, as I daresay you’ve found out for yourself. And so, if you go on and follow her, it will, I fancy, be all the better for you, Madame Fleurette—d’ye see?”

“Yes; thank you,” I answered faintly.

He went on talking in a nervous fidgety fashion, drinking several glasses of champagne meanwhile ; I, if I replied at all, replying at random ; until, the door again opening, in swept Aurora, flushed and radiant, having been genuinely encored in a new comic song.

“Madame Fleurette !”

It was the sharp voice of the dreadful call-boy outside the manager's door.

Aurora was very warm. The house was densely packed, she said, and suffocatingly hot. She caught up a soft white wrap that she had brought with her and deftly flung it round her neck.

“I am coming to the wings,” she whispered. “Remember. Be brave—for the child's sake !”

I seized her hand and pressed it tremulously. Speak I could not just then. And so we all three went out together ; Mr. Binkworthy leading the way.

Two minutes later : and I stood upon the stage alone.

Again my recollections become blurred and hazy. I am the central figure in a vision, as it were.

Dimly, by fancy's aid, I can see again the interior of the great horse-shoe-shaped building.

with the myriad eyes of the multitude which filled it to the roof turned with simultaneous curiosity upon me—upon me, as I stood alone there before them; pale as wan death itself; in my plain black gown; with a sheet of music quivering in my hand.

Staring upward at me, immediately below the footlights, there were rows of men and women lounging in comfortable-looking red-velvet-covered seats; the men were smoking; both men and women were drinking; whilst waiters, with bottles and glasses on trays, went nimbly hurrying to and fro.

At a table in the middle of the theatre sat a man with what looked like an auctioneer's hammer in his hand. He, I was afterwards told, was the well-known and popular "chairman" of the Levity; the expression however was then Arabic to me. From the private boxes above the stalls—narrow dark compartments, with tawdry decorations and dirty limp muslin curtains—lorgnettes were levelled pitilessly at the pale trembling woman upon the stage.

The instant I appeared a great silence seemed to fall upon the theatre; no buzzing, no murmur, no stir of any kind. The chairman rapped smartly upon his table; inviting, I imagined,

the applause which he reckoned might give me confidence. But his hammer rapped in vain ; no hand was raised to bid me welcome.

I was a novice—I might be a *rara avis* ; but I was unknown. I was an Englishwoman with a Frenchified name ; I was going to sing them English songs—perhaps some French ones as well. But nobody present as yet knew whether I was worth hearing or not ; they had only Mr. Binkworthy's word for it ; and they meant to judge for themselves. It was clear that I had yet to win my way into the affections of a Levity audience ; and they liked a good article for their money, or would have none of it.

It was thus that I interpreted—and interpreted aright—the cold respectful silence of the huge crowded house.

The prelude, the opening bars—those few plaintive familiar minor notes—of Virginia Gabriel's dear melancholy song rose up from violin and piano in the orchestra, and clave the stifling atmosphere of the hushed and listening theatre.

The hour was indeed come !

I thought of my darling ; I prayed for strength—prayed for it in a swift mute wild fashion that was a kind of agony ; and then—and then my voice obeyed me, and I sang the song

of "Ruby" as I never had sung it in my life before.

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It was over—all over!

The curtain had descended; the band in full had struck up an inspiring gavotte; but the cheering and the uproar in the theatre were tremendous, and killed all sound of the orchestra.

"Thunders of applause" was a phrase which I had often heard and read of; now for the first time I thoroughly comprehended what it meant. I realised by-and-by that I was once more in the manager's room, with Aurora laughing and crying in turn upon my shoulder; and with Mr. Binkworthy himself, the tears in his eyes, shaking my hand with an energy that was absolutely terrific. There, too, in perfect evening attire, had appeared Lord Tracy—a privileged patron of the establishment—his glass screwed into his eye; astonishment unspeakable stamped upon every feature.

"Bai Jove, Mrs. Darkwood," he gasped at last—"who'd have thought it? Never was I more astonished in my life, Mrs. Darkwood! Bai Jove!"

"Madame Fleurette, my lord—Madame Fleurette!" cried Mr. Binkworthy hysterically.

"This lady is not 'Mrs Darkwood' here, if you please, my lord!"

"Bai Jove!" uttered his lordship again; this time more deliberately and wonderingly than ever. It was too much; he "could not take it in in a moment," as the Viscount vaguely expressed it. He must have time.

Here some *employé* of the theatre put his head round the manager's door.

"Mr. Binkworthy, sir," said the messenger hurriedly, "they won't be quiet, nor they won't listen to the Brothers Bouquet. The noise is something awful; and the gentlemen of the orchestra don't know what to be at. Apparently the *angcores* ain't satisfied 'em, sir, for they're a-shouting and a-hallooing again for Madame Fleurette."

"That means that they want me to lead you on, my dear Madame Fleurette," explained Mr. Binkworthy, offering me his hand for the ceremony. His state of delight was simply indescribable. "You won't refuse 'em?" said he quite piteously.

"No; I will go with you if you wish it," I answered.

I spoke mechanically—I smiled mechanically; and yet I was conscious that I felt deeply thank-

ful, and I believe very happy, to know, to be certain, that I had triumphed on this terrible night.

And so a carpenter upon either side of the stage pulled back the drop-curtain, and the stout manager, glittering with his wondrous jewellery, himself stepped before the footlights, gallantly leading me by the hand.

How the people shouted, stamped, cheered, raved! The deafening roar is in my ears still. Never, never shall I forget it! It seemed to me that they were all standing up in a mass, waving their hats and their pocket-handkerchiefs.

"Bow to them, madame—bow to them; they expect it," whispered Mr. Binkworthy hoarsely.

I suppose I looked—as I in truth was—helplessly, utterly bewildered; wondering insensibly, it may be, whether what I had done really merited this hurricane of enthusiasm, this extraordinary tempest of excitement and approbation. Thus awakened by my manager to the etiquette of the situation, with what self-command I could muster I bowed to the right and to the left—with what grace, in the trying circumstances, the act was performed I cannot say! And then, amidst another wild outburst of the "Bravo!"

shouting and the hand-clapping, I was at length permitted to retire.

But Mr. Binkworthy for a few minutes remained upon the stage by himself, in order to make a quite tearful little speech in front of the curtain—thanking his overflowing audience for the generous and enthusiastic reception which they had accorded to Madame Fleurette—"a stranger and a foreigner in London, he might almost say"—and assuring all present that until further notice she would continue to sing nightly at the Levity; and at the Levity only. "And now, with their kind permission, the Brothers Bouquet, old Levity favourites, would," *et-cætera*.

Perrier-Jouet flowed without stint that night in the manager's cosy sanctum; and Mr. Binkworthy begged hard that Aurora and I—and of course Lord Tracy—would accompany him home to supper.

His little 'ouse was at 'Ighgate, a snug enough little crib; his housekeeper—he had the misfortune to be a widower—the best soul alive, expected us; and indeed, said he, he positively could take no denial. It was an extry-ordinary occasion, and he could take no denial. Mr. Binkworthy pleaded eloquently; my success, which was his success, and the repeated bumpers

of champagne in which he had drowned all anticipation of failure, rendered him touchingly in earnest now ; but he pleaded to no effect.

My work was done. I was going straightway homeward to my quiet lodgings. Isla, my darling, my all in the world, was there—perhaps she was even awake and watching for my return.

Lord Tracy at once offered to drive us in his brougham to Primrose Hill ; for Aurora had stated her intention of going home with me.

“No, Loftus,” said she flatly ; “we don’t want you to-night, dear boy ; you’d be one too many, and that’s the truth. You go back to your box and see the ballet ; you adore the ballet, I know. And this evening, just to console you for once in a way, you may ogle Topsy Tiverton. I shall not be jealous.”

The Viscount grumbled ; scowled through his glass ; and said, “Hang Topsy Tiverton !” But Miss de Vere was inexorable.

“I brought Mrs. Darkwood down here to-night,” said she coolly ; “and to-night I intend to take her home. I have lots to say to her—so Loftus, my dear, good-bye. And, Loftus, be sure you remember what I have told you, and keep a quiet tongue in your head until

I see you to-morrow. You understand, dear. Ta, ta !”

And so Aurora and I, as we had started, alone together in a hansom drove back to Primrose Hill. But, when Lord Tracy had closed the narrow doors of the cab—he had escorted us to the stage-door—and the driver had let down the window, for the night was raw and a drizzling mist had begun to fall, Aurora put her arm about my waist and hugged me close to her side.

My head dropped heavily to her bosom then ; and I burst into tears.





CHAPTER XXV.

THE end of November was near—a November dull and drear enough ; with horrid choking fogs and brief dark days, throughout which sometimes the sickly yellow gas was everywhere kept burning, day and evening alike. I was still living, unmolested by Daryl, with Mrs. Sadler in Bentham Street ; though divers changes—for is not it a sad old world of incessant shift and change ?—had been going on elsewhere. A change that I deplored as sincerely as did the manager of the Levity himself was the loss of my true-hearted friend Aurora Ramage. When we should meet again I knew not ; nor did she ; and Aurora, as it chanced, was about the worst correspondent alive. I heard nothing now of the doings of the house in Chesterfield Avenue ; nothing of Mrs. Ramage and her lodgers ; nothing of Daryl Darkwood's move-

ments, nor of those of Herr von Rosenberg. I was ignorant whether my husband was still in London, or whether he had migrated elsewhere.

I missed Aurora sorely ; missed her frequent calls in Bentham Street—for never a week used to go by without her looking in two or three times to see how Isla was—and her friendly, her wise companionship at the theatre more than all.

She had, as she had told me that she shortly would, given up the stage “for good ;” and her marriage with Lord Tracy was fixed to take place at the beginning of the coming February.

Aurora, in these dismal November days, was, luckily for her, in the country, staying at the house of two rich aunts of her future husband—large-hearted and most amiable old ladies, spinster-sisters, who adored their nephew Loftus, and who would have done anything to please him that he asked of them. For his sake they cordially received Aurora Ramage at their delightful country-house ; and there introduced her to all of Lord Tracy’s friends and relatives who felt well-disposed towards the young man ; to all of them, that is, except his father and his mother, the Earl and the

Countess, who, in dark and terrible displeasure, remained shut up at Starch, nursing their wrath in the ancestral hall of the family—which hall, by-the-way, was not yet fifty years old—sternly refusing to have anything to do with Aurora. They would not, it was said, even tolerate the bare mention of her name. A very high and mighty pair were the Earl and Countess of Starch.

They had set their parental hearts upon the Lady Cassandra Bearwarden alliance—Lady Cassandra, who was five-and-thirty, if she was a day; very plain, very blue-blooded, and with a quarter of a million of her own. And Lady Cassandra Bearwarden, the great folk at Starch well knew, might on any day be had for the asking.

Poor Aurora!

Lord Tracy's father was the first Earl of his line; and his young lordship's mother had been a Miss Coggins, the only daughter of an h-less but an immensely wealthy Alderman of the City of London. But that was years ago; and—well, things had altered strangely since then, and the whilom Miss Coggins had, by a freak of fortune, blossomed into the Countess of Starch.

I had leaped into sudden favour at the

Levity ; and from the night of my first appearance at Mr. Binkworthy's theatre of varieties my position as "first star" there had remained unchallenged. It was my invariable custom to arrive at the theatre a few minutes before I was due upon the stage ; afterwards to quit the place the moment I had performed my duty. I do not remember ever exchanging a single word with any one "artist," male or female, engaged at the Levity, with the notable exception of Miss de Vere. They were not all like Aurora ; and that is the unpleasant truth. I believe I was accredited by the rest of the company with all sorts of ugly qualities ; a "disgusting" pride heading the list ; being generally known and spoken of at the theatre as "that Madame Fleur-ette." It is surprising what a world of scorn can, if desired, be packed into the simple little word "that."

Of course, too, my great and swift popularity was much against me ; and the spite of a jealous tongue is the worst of venom. Mr. Binkworthy however was my abject vassal ; and in every possible manner he made things as smooth for me as it was in his power to make them.

By this date I was quite at home in my nightly work at the theatre ; and no nervous fit,

no attack of stage-fright, ever overtook me now. I did my work as conscientiously as I could, and was liberally paid for so doing it. Thirty pounds a-week Mr. Binkworthy was giving me; after Christmas I was to be paid forty. Out of my weekly salary I spent perhaps three pounds; the remainder, on every Monday morning, I took to a bank near Bentham Street—feeling deeply thankful that a goodly provision was accumulating against the coming of a rainy day. The future is never, alas, sure! The sun at dawn may rise in glory, and at eventide set in gloom.

Whatever was right or necessary for Isla, that she had in abundance. But, for myself, I continued to live with the utmost frugality in those cheap apartments I had found near Primrose Hill. And yet, in spite of all my care and cherishing, the child did not get back her “Thangate roses.”

It fretted me cruelly to perceive this; to note how white and thin were the little arms; to hear with what difficulty she breathed sometimes after too quickly mounting the steep kitchen stairs. But Isla—sweet patient little soul—never complained. She always said that she was “quite well,” only rather tired now and then—that was all; and once she unexpectedly asked me whether I remembered how Mr. Evers-

leigh used to carry her up to the cliff—always on a hot day—when she was tired at Thangate?

“Yes, dear, perfectly,” I answered; and changed the subject. We never talked of Mr. Eversleigh now.

There were times when I felt downright ill myself—ill from a sheer anxiety which was worse than physical pain; for its intensity robbed me of my sleep at night and kept me wretched throughout the day.

The increasing delicacy of the child was not to be mistaken. A mother’s eyes, at all events, were not to be shut to the fact. The conviction that she should not be allowed to remain in London began to haunt my imagination; I felt certain that the thick moist air, with its deadly early chill, the “pea-soup” fogs, the dismal sunless days, were by degrees working fatal mischief to the fragile constitution of my darling.

This torturing idea having gripped me, as it were, body and soul, I forthwith took her to a famous Harley Street physician—Doctor Grace. Should it cost me a whole week’s earnings, I would obtain his opinion without delay.

“The little one is undoubtedly delicate—indeed very delicate,” he said blandly. “But with regard to her living in London—and you

say that you are by circumstances compelled to be in London just now—why, you must know that a great many delicate children are obliged to live in town all the year round, and yet eventually they grow as strong as their more sturdy-born brothers and sisters. I am sure I need hardly tell you that you should take care of her.”

“I do take care of her,” I replied almost passionately.

“Is there,” inquired the great man—who, in bodily appearance, at any rate, was small and wizened—as blandly as before, “any tendency at all to consumption in your family, or in that of your husband ; will you tell me ?”

“I—I do not know,” I answered uneasily. I felt that I had changed colour—turned somewhat pale.

“You do not know ?”—smiling in faint surprise.

“No,” I said shortly ; and then, with an indefinable sense of shame, or something like it, I felt the paleness going and a hot flush taking its place.

The physician pressed the question no further ; but, turning to the escritoire before which he sat, he began to write a prescription ; murmur-

ing softly as his pen scratched the paper that
“We must be careful—very careful—to avoid
all coughs and colds.”

It was soon done; and with a few courteous words he handed the prescription to me in return for the two-guinea fee which was the cost of a five-minutes' consultation with the famous Doctor Grace.

“If she is no better,” said he, tenderly with his cool shrivelled white forefinger touching Isla's cheek, “at the end of a month, bring her to me again; will you? Thank you. Good morning.”

He shook hands, bowed us out, and I left the doctor's big gloomy house feeling, to speak the truth, but poorly comforted by the interview. If only I could get away from vast cruel London to some quiet sea-girt hamlet upon the south or the south-west coast, where the air was pure and balmy even in winter, and deadly yellow fogs were not! But in the country what work could I find to do—work, at all events, that would furnish the requisite luxuries for Isla—work that would pay me like my singing for Mr. Binkworthy? A ray of hope flashed across my mind. Would—oh, would the manager, I wondered, grant me a respite, a brief holiday? If he would, I could in that case well afford to take the child

for a few weeks to Bournemouth or to Ventnor ; perhaps to the Devon coast ; or even as far as Cornwall.

On that very evening I determined to ask Mr. Binkworthy whether or not he would let me go. A breath from the lonely and health-giving ocean might, at this season of the year, do wonders for Isla. Thangate in the winter would of course be too bleak for her. If anywhere, this time, it must be the south.

Accordingly that night, before I quitted the theatre, I plucked up courage to speak to the manager. But his face grew long as he comprehended what I wanted ; he scratched his chin in silence ; and to my dismay, I perceived that Mr. Binkworthy regarded my scheme unfavourably.

“ You see—you see, Madame Fleurette,” he said at last, in a halting and deprecating manner, as if loath—as I believe at the moment he honestly was—to cause me the least distress, “ you have hooked on first-class, as I knew you would, with my audience here ; there ain’t a more popular singer than you are just now at the Levity, nor at any other place in London, if it comes to that ; and—and it would be a small fortune out of my pocket if—if you was to cry

off before the termination of your engagement. And—and I don't wish to appear unfeelin' or unkind in any way—but an agreement is an agreement, you know; and—and—— Come," he broke off more blithely, "don't you think you are perhaps jest a wee bit over-anxious about the little gal? Mothers are so quick to take alarm—all of 'em alike; or, if you are bent on her going into the country, ain't there some well-disposed relative you've got out of town, an uncle or an aunt or a married sister or somebody, as 'ud agree to take care of her, if you made it worth their while, until the winter's over and the warm weather comes round again—eh?"

"There is no one," I answered desolately. I felt that I could have cried like a school-girl with sick disappointment.

Mr. Binkworthy laid a fatherly hand—a hand, as usual, adorned with many a massive ring—upon my shoulder; and for a few moments he kept it there.

"Well, cheer up, madame," he said, meaning to be kind, but at the same time careful lest a too-sentimental generosity should cause him to stumble where he should remain firm in his own interests; "and don't give way to the dumps! You'll magnify trifles if you do—'ll make

mountains out of mole-hills and all that. There, there"—patting me on the shoulder—"we'll see about it by-and-by; we'll see what can be done. I dare say we shall be able to manage it by-and-by. But—but it wants a little thinking over, you know; it can't be done in a hurry. We'll talk about it another day, Madame Fleurette."

I sighed in a hopeless manner. "Another day," I was drearily convinced, would be slow in coming if it were left to Mr. Binkworthy to fix the date of it.

"Thank you. Good-night, Mr. Binkworthy," said I, without looking at him. I rolled up my music mechanically, and went home.

My heart was leaden that night, God knows!—heavy and full of bitter rebellion. I was a slave; in bondage; chained to the oar, it seemed, with my freedom gone! I must submit uncomplainingly to the will of a task-master who held life itself more cheaply than gold. It is a golden age, with a vengeance, this in which we live; when Mammon and his millions are exalted like the calf of old, and when men will grovel in the very dust to worship them! We give our right hand to the world; and our left to God.

Adhering to my rule of strict economy in all

matters touching my present mode of life, it was my habit to journey to and from the theatre in omnibuses which ran conveniently past the corner of Bentham Street. But to-night I somehow felt that I could not endure the jolting and the crowding, the cold damp straw underfoot, the dim malodorous oil-lamps overhead, which are such distinct and familiar features of that public abomination the London 'bus. I felt in truth wretched and lonely; unutterably heart-sick and depressed. The future loomed menacing, full of trouble and gloom. The slow rumbling movement of an omnibus, with its perpetual maddening stoppages, would in my present condition of mind have been torture unendurable—would have sent me crazy outright.

I hailed a passing hansom with a good horse, and so was driven rapidly home.

I had my own key, and let myself into the house. But I met Mrs. Sadler in the passage, carrying a water-can; she being on her way upstairs.

"How is Isla?" were my first words.

"Well, 'm," replied Mrs. Sadler, with her usual doleful air, "the little dear really did seem very porely after you was gone. She complained of a sore throat; and I fetched her some

lozengers—at least, old Mr. Jones did, who came down and have been sitting with her; and now she seems got a bit more chirrupy-like.”

“She’s awake then?”

“Oh, yes, ’m! She was a few minutes ago.”

“Is old Mr. Jones still sitting with her?”

“Oh, yes, ’m!” said Mrs. Sadler again. And with her can of water she went sighing upstairs.

I moved into the sitting-room, unfastening my cloak as I went, and passed quickly into the bedroom beyond it.

“My darling,” I cried, trying to speak joyously—“mamma is come home!”

Isla, sucking lozenges and wide awake, was however alone; for old Mr. Jones had vanished—had disappeared, I suppose, by the other door.

It was always the case. I had frightened the old man away!





CHAPTER XXVI.

IT was heart-breaking work, this having to go on with a duty which with each day was becoming to me more irksome and distasteful.

The novelty, the excitement of the first week or so had worn off; and I was growing to downright hate my nightly work at the Levity.

In my soul I never had liked it; my natural instinct, my inherent prejudices with regard to a stage-life for a woman were reviving with increased force.

Yet, if Aurora had still been at the theatre to cheer my flagging spirit and to bear me company; or if Isla, whom I was compelled every evening to leave at home in Bentham Street, either in the care of Mrs. Sadler—who was continually remarking that the child was “fading away like”—or in that of shadowy old Mr. Jones, had

not looked so white and wistful, so unchildlike and pathetic in her patient suffering; it would not have been so miserable—it all would not have been so hard to bear. Ah, no! If Aurora had still been my stage-companion, and if the health of my dear little girl had kept unbroken, I should doubtless have been able and willing to go on singing for Mr. Binkworthy, if not with a heart thoroughly at ease, at any rate with one free from that gnawing pain of unrest and discontent, that terrible leaden sense of near calamity, which oppressed me daily now.

It was anguish for me to leave the child when evening came; for I knew that, in spite of her patient little smile, she was really ill, and indeed needed my tenderest care. But my master at the theatre was inexorable in an affable sort of way; and, once having securely got me, he refused to let me go. If his glove, so to speak, was silken, the hand beneath it was of unyielding iron.

Unfortunately I seemed to be more popular than ever at the Levity; and the spirits of Mr. Binkworthy in consequence rose higher and higher. Offers from managers of similar places of entertainment came to me now in abundance; but the terms of agreement between me and

my first manager precluded all possibility of my acceptance of any one of them.

Oh, the irony of fate! One man, who, it appeared, had a "temple of varieties" at Marmouth Bay—a healthy flourishing seaport upon the south-west coast—wrote and begged me to come and sing at his theatre. I might name my own terms, he said, and all journey-expenses should be paid me.

And yet it was impossible—impossible! Oh, sad, sad word—sad and hopeless sometimes as "good-bye" itself! Nevertheless, what would not I have given, what would not I have done, to be free to turn my back upon cruel London and to carry off my darling to Marmouth Bay?

And nightly at the Levity I was greeted with deafening cheers; my most pathetic ballads winning for me the greatest storm of applause. My heart was breaking; tears often were in my voice; and I sang my melancholy songs straight from my heart, I suppose.

"She sings with true feeling—true as it is rare; that, sir, is the charm of Madame Fleur-ette—the secret of her success," I overheard someone saying close to me upon the pavement, on one occasion as I was hurriedly leaving the

theatre to catch my omnibus hard by. "That woman, sir, feels every word she sings, bless you! There were real tears in her eyes to-night. I saw them distinctly."

True feeling! Real tears! Ah, my friend, yes—even so! The feeling was there, and was true enough; the tears were there, and were real enough; but who of them amongst that audience which crammed the theatre, smoking and drinking and ripe for the evening's amusement, and which stared at and applauded in wild delight the pale dark-haired woman in her simple black gown, guessed—or would have cared a straw had they known—that the singer herself was the unhappiest of women, and that her songs, in very truth, came straight from her breaking heart?

And, in response to a tumultuous encore for "The Better Land," I had that night at Mr. Binkworthy's request—or shall I say his command?—sung them the jaunty "Thady O'Flynn."

"Must give 'em grave and gay," whispered the manager hoarsely. "They don't like too much of the one nor too much of the other—not 'too much sentiment, but just sentiment enough,' don't ye know? If you make 'em cry at first,

you must get 'em to laugh afterwards. That's the way to fetch 'em."

"Thady O'Flynn" — think of it!—and my little child dying at home!

Dying? Ah, me! Could it be true? Well, they told me so—though I did not, would not believe them. Dying? Oh, no! Why should there be any talk of death?

"You are wrong—you are wrong," I said passionately. "The child was delicate from her birth; has always been delicate—always, always, always! Do not you understand? She is no worse now than she has been before. She never was like other children. Never—my sweet fragile little Isla!"

No; I would not believe them. Heaven, I said, never could be so barbarous, so exquisitely cruel as to take from me my little child; whose innocent existence had been to me the one perfect joy, the one bright star of hope, as it were, in those heavy and sorrowful years of my life since Daryl Darkwood had made me his wife.

I believe now, looking back to those sad days in Bentham Street, that my grief had in some wise touched my brain; for I could not, try how I would, quite realise that I was soon to be left alone—utterly alone, alone for evermore!

No friend, no husband, no child. Alone! Well, if that ever should come to pass—and I would not believe it to be possible—Death would perhaps then be merciful and summon me too. I could not, cared not to live without my child.

If Isla must go—went

“From this room into the next”

—why, I too would go “in a minute,” would quickly follow her; there should be “no time to be vexed.” Life robbed of my darling would be life no longer to me—but at best a living death. That could not be borne. Surely life is not worth living when one has lost one’s all in it!

There were times when I wept myself half-crazy; lying prone upon my bed, with my hands clutching the pillows; wept until the fount of my tears was dry and the storm of sobs was wholly spent. Then I would rise, loosen my hair, and plunge my disfigured face into a bath of cold water; the next moment laughing hysterically to think that I should have been fool enough to weep at all! What was there to weep for? Nothing. Isla, after all, was not going to die. And yet, with my palms pressed hard to my temples, I remembered dully that I had again taken her for advice to the famed

Doctor Grace ; and not only to that renowned physician, but likewise to other eminent men of his profession. And did not they now one and all say the same thing—that the child was doomed, had not long to live ; that she had fallen into a swift decline ; that no power or skill upon earth, no change from town to country, could hold the little wan pilgrim back from “ the strait and dreadful pass ” ?

But of course they did not speak the truth. Doctors always exaggerate—especially in cases of decline. Nevertheless, why, I wonder, did I one day write off wildly to Aurora and tell her, with tears raining upon the paper beneath my pen, what those foolish doctors had said ?

On the very next day Aurora, laden with gifts for Isla, appeared in dingy Bentham Street ; having travelled by express up to town from the country place she was stopping at ; and I fell upon her bosom, crying piteously.

I remember her telling me very kindly and seriously that Daryl should be sent for ; he was, she believed, still living at her mother's house in Chesterfield Avenue. He ought—for right was right, said Aurora—to see his child ; to know that she was ill ; it was wrong and unnatural to keep him in ignorance of his little

daughter's state. But at this I exclaimed angrily,—

“He shall not come here. He cares for neither of us. I forbid you, Aurora—do you hear?—I forbid you to tell Daryl where I am! Recollect, please, that you promised to keep my secret; and never will I forgive you if you break your word!”

I forget how Aurora reasoned with me on the matter; but she spoke of Christian love and charity, of the divine qualities of mercy and forgiveness, and was altogether very gentle and good. It was nobler to forgive than to be forgiven, she said. But I was firm, stubborn, in my passion and despair. Voluntarily I never would see Daryl Darkwood again.

And, when Aurora was going away, she sat down and took the child upon her knee, and hid her face on my darling's neck. I heard her soft slow tender kisses; but why—but why did she keep her face hidden for so long?

“What are you doing?” I said sharply.

Aurora looked up; her eyes were wet. Strange!

“I—I was saying good-bye,” she gently answered; “that is all.”

“One would think—one would think,” said I,

in a tone of reproach—why did the mere effort of speech seem to suffocate me?—"that—that you were saying good-bye for ever. Why make such a fuss about it? You used," I added querulously, "to be so practical, so sensible. You have grown silly and sentimental, Aurora."

"Oh, no, I haven't!" she answered quietly.

And then she had to hasten from Bentham Street to catch her train at—Euston, I think she said, was her station.

After Aurora had gone that day, the twilight, I remember, seemed to come on very suddenly; and, with the wintry gloaming, snow, in small eddying flakes, was driven against the windows by the bleak north breeze. I stared at the lamps as they were being lighted in the street. They looked quite dim, and flickered miserably. The snow, then, was thicker than it appeared, thought I.

Snow? Why, it must be December, of course—nearly mid-December, in fact. How time sped! Christmas would soon be with us, I was musing—Christmas, that holy season of "peace and goodwill towards men." What did it mean, that much-vaunted peace and goodwill on earth towards men? Did it mean mirth, happiness, plenty—a healing, an alleviation of all earthly

suffering and distress? That could not be so when, in wretched fireless attics and cellars, the very poor—men, women, and children alike—were naked, frozen, starving outright; and when the rich, clad in purple and fine linen, by their blazing hearths fared sumptuously every day! What an unfair and a heartless old world it was! And what a lonely Christmas festival mine and Isla's would be! Could it indeed be actually true that "God is love"—that God is just? Oh, inscrutable love, inscrutable justice—never to be rightly understood upon this side of the grave!

When it was time for me to dress and to start for the theatre, Isla was still lying upon the sofa drawn near to the fire, the child's favourite place, with a warm gray woollen shawl of mine partly covering her. She did not want to go to bed just yet, she said; she was not very tired—not very; and Mrs. Sadler could undress her and put her in her cot when she was ready. Besides, old Mr. Jones, she informed me, had bought her a new story-book full of beautiful pictures, and all about a "poor cock-robin who was killed by a wicked sparrow with his bow and arrow;" and old Mr. Jones, by-and-by, when I was gone, was coming down to read it to her—Isla—and to sit

with her perhaps "until mamma came back from the theatre."

The cruel hacking cough seized her unexpectedly—a sound which smote and racked my heart with an anguish beyond expression ; and my darling could tell me no more. The paroxysm over, white as a snowdrop she lay upon my breast.

I waited with her, soothed her, till she was better again ; gave her some port-wine and water and some calf's-foot jelly ; and then rang for Mrs. Sadler to take my place by the sofa.

I must go. Ah, me—how wretched was I !

For the last fortnight or more—indeed, since the child had grown so weak—I had been frequently late at the theatre. To-night I was once more late. My usual omnibus was gone ; no other was in sight. There was no help for it ; I hailed a hansom that was lingering by a public-house and drove down to the Levity as fast as the horse could take me thither.

It was still snowing, softly and thickly, the flakes whirling slantwise in the small but biting north wind. It was just the night to drive pedestrians, idlers, street-roamers, to the warmth, comfort, and glitter of a theatre of varieties. The great open pillared doors and brilliant vesti-

bule, with its mirrors, palms, and pictures, of Mr. Binkworthy's popular establishment were an attraction, a temptation in themselves.

"Tut, tut—you are late again, Madame Fleur-ette," said the manager, somewhat impatiently; "and naturally the audience have been kicking up no end of a disturbance because you did not appear in the order set down for you on the programme. We have had to send on the O'Leary Family, with their eccentric entertainment—they wouldn't listen to the Sisters Gay—before anything like order could be restored. There was the same bother the other evening," grumbled Mr. Binkworthy.

"I cannot help it," I answered wearily—it might be indifferently.

"Surely, madame, you could be more punctual if you tried," rejoined the manager testily. "I should—I should fine you if you was anybody else. I—I had no call to complain of you at first."

I turned upon him fiercely.

"I have a little sick child at home now, recollect," I said. "I came as early as I could. Worry me no more!"

The manager shrugged his shoulders; and spread out his fat beringed hands.

"I hope she's better—the little gal," said he.
"Is she?"

I did not answer him. But, with my whole soul in hot revolt, with moist quivering hands, and with eyes that were burnt dim with fiery tears, I turned and unrolled the music of my first song.

My reception that evening, when I at last appeared upon the stage, was as uproariously hearty as ever; and, although the atmosphere of the great building, with its tobacco smoke and smell of beer and spirits, seemed to stifle me, to turn me sick; the glare of the footlights and of the chandeliers to blind my aching and yearning eyes; the crowd of eager and staring faces to bewilder me strangely to-night—accustomed as I had grown to the odiousness of it all—yet I suppose I sang my songs to the complete satisfaction of my listeners and admirers; for again and again was I recalled in front of the orchestra to bow my acknowledgments to this token of my popularity.

My last song, like its two predecessors, was frantically encored. I had managed however, by gently shaking my head and appealingly touching my throat, to shirk complying with the wishes of the audience with regard to my earlier songs.

But my third was "Kathleen Mavourneen"—always a tremendous favourite with Levity patrons—and there was "no getting out of it" this time, as Mr. Binkworthy, in some excitement, expressed it.

"I cannot sing again to-night—indeed I cannot," I said earnestly.

"You must," said the manager. "Hark at 'em!"

"I cannot—oh, I cannot!" I moaned. "Let me go home!"

"Pooh! Sing them one more, and then you shall leave. They'll never be quiet else; and there's Professor Pampeluna and his performing dogs waiting to go on. Come—don't be a fool, Madame Fleurette!" said the manager roughly. He disappeared; but soon returned with a small tumbler of champagne. "Here, drink this—look sharp! It'll pull you together and give you 'eart," said Mr. Binkworthy more kindly; and himself put the glass to my unwilling lips.

I was his slave—his paid slave; and so it ended in my going heavily back to the stage, and by my presence thereon once more hushing the theatre into tranquillity and decent behaviour.

The stage attendants, in their ridiculous and

shabby livery, had already wheeled on the grand piano ; for, whenever I accepted the encore for my last song of the evening, I was expected, as before, to accompany myself. But no “Kerry Dance,” no “Thady O’Flynn” for them to-night ! They must have what I chose to give them ; or go without.

For some moments my hands moved aimlessly over the keys of the piano. I struck a few minor chords, and then played a brief dreamy prelude of my own composition. I wanted no notes for my own accompanying. The music of the sweet old melody came back to me out of dreamland—was plaintively stealing from beneath my wandering hands. I remembered the words of the sweet sad song as perfectly as if I had last sung them only yesterday, and not long, dim, and shadowy years before. And yet—and yet, was it so very long ago, after all ? Strange that, on that night of all nights, I should have found myself singing the favourite song of my girlhood, of my lost happy youth, when I knew not Daryl Darkwood, nor aught of evil or of sorrow—

“I saw from the beach, when the morning was shining”
—the song that I sometimes used to sing to—

I trembled ; shivered as if the ice-cold breeze from without had touched me ; but played on mechanically nevertheless.

“ Ne’er tell me of glories serenely adorning

The close of our day, the calm eve of our night—

Give me back, give me back the wild freshness of
Morning,

Her clouds and her tears are worth Evening’s
best light.”

I sang—sang with a passionate feeling of hopeless regret, all unconscious though I was perhaps of it at the time ; with a vague, tender longing for the glad innocence of youth which never, never more could be mine again—which, in its fidelity and yearning pathos, seemed absolutely to thrill the densely-packed house.

Never within my short experience of it and the ways of its audience had the theatre been so hushed. No flitting to and fro of nimble waiters ; no vulgar popping of corks and jingling of glasses ; no careless chatter at the distant bars, where flirtation and refreshment were wont to go together—nothing but the sound of a woman’s voice, clear, unutterably sad, and tremulous with tears, pathetically telling her listeners that the

heart of the singer was breaking, and that "the wild freshness of morning," with all its sweetness, purity, and vigour, was dead, lost to her; for her had vanished, in this life, for ever and for ever!

It was not often that I glanced downward at the occupants of the stalls; they always appeared to be so horribly near to the stage. The bold upward stares, whether of curiosity or of admiration, which I there encountered annoyed me acutely—to me were disagreeable in the extreme. But to-night, as I was in the act of rising from the music-stool to bow my thanks to the familiar outburst of enthusiasm, something—a strange indefinable force or influence which some people, I dare say, would call "magnetic"—involuntarily caused me to turn my eyes downward upon those rows of crimson seats immediately behind the band.

There, in the end seat of the third row from the stage, his eyes fixed upon me—eyes in which, I fancied just then, there were shining together amazement, joy, reproach, and a hopeless fatherly love—sat a figure that for years I had seen only in my dreams. Was it a ghost—a ghost from my dead forlorn past—or was it in grim reality——

No—no ; it was no error of vision ; no trick of fancy ; no apparition from an immaterial world. God help me, it was solid flesh and blood !

Time notwithstanding had dealt hardly with the benign-looking old man ; he looked indeed as if his years sat in heaviness and in weariness upon him.

His light blue eyes were as mild as ever in expression ; but his pale lips were drawn down with strong lines about them. His face, with its fringe of iron-gray whisker, was no longer pink and smooth ; but had now a colourless, an almost leaden hue which in the gaslight was ghastly to behold. He had, too, grown very bald. Upon the convenient ledge before him stood a glass of steaming grog ; between the fingers of one wiry veined hand he held the stump of a cigar ; whilst with the other hand, upon his knee, he grasped a black bag. Great Heaven—the *black bag* !

Our eyes met.

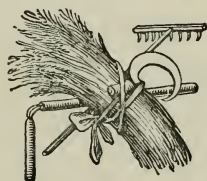
He smiled mournfully ; half rose from his seat, still faintly smiling, as if uncertain what to do. It was horrible.

A smothered cry broke from me. I staggered sidewise back on to the music-stool ; discord-

antly striking the notes of the piano with my nerveless outstretched arms.

Some one shrieked : “ She is ill—dying ! ”

Then the lights seemed to go out ; the theatre to spin round. The curtain fell with a crash ; and I remember no more.





CHAPTER XXVII.

WHEN I recovered strength and sensibility, I was in the manager's room. — I found myself sitting there in an easy-chair, with Mr. Binkworthy bending over me, looking thoroughly scared and anxious. He was holding brandy, or brandy-and-water, to my lips. I thrust it away; and with difficulty rose to my feet.

“Pah! I do not want it. Don't!” I muttered, in a tone of weary disgust. “I am—I am going home immediately.”

“You are not strong enough yet. Do pray wait a bit, Madame Fleurette,” pleaded the manager. “'Tisn't very late—not eleven; and—”

I shook my head; held up my hand to silence him; found my wraps, and put them

on. One of them was a fur-lined cloak, the warm hood of which I drew close over my roughened hair.

"Let me see you home—you really ain't fit to go alone," said Mr. Binkworthy earnestly. "Or there's my brome waiting outside. Take it an' welcome, so long as you get safe home."

"No, no, no! I—I am quite well now—indeed I am, thank you," I told him hurriedly. "It was the heat of the place—nothing else. The theatre is dreadfully full to-night."

"Not more crammed than common since you've been singing here," replied the manager, with a rather uneasy air. He was accompanying me down the dim white-washed passage to the stage-door. I felt that he was glancing askance at me. "They were saying," he added in the next breath, "that—that you had recognised an old friend in the stalls, Madame Fleurette, and it upset you."

"They said that?"

"Yes. Was it true?"

"If it was, it is no one's business but mine," I replied coldly. "I repeat, the theatre was stifling—frightfully so. It always is. It wants better ventilation or something. I am sure I wonder that I have not fainted before."

"The night's bitter enough outside, anyhow," said the manager drily — "it snows hard."

"So it did when I arrived. Good-night, Mr. Binkworthy."

He caught hold of my cloak to detain me another minute or two.

"For God's sake, Madame Fleurette, take care o' yourself!" he said huskily. "Don't go and ketch cold, whatever you do, or—or you mayn't be able to sing to-morrow night."

The bare thought of such a calamity seemed to make him perspire. He blew a loud sigh; pulled out a puce-silk pocket-handkerchief and wiped his shining forehead.

"That mustn't happen, you know," said he, with a poor attempt at a friendly smile. "'Twould never do to disappoint 'em at this time o' year; and—and when you've got to be such a tremenjous favourite with 'em all, too!"

"Do not be frightened. It will not happen," said I, with a kind of scornful impatience which I took no pains to disguise. "I don't forget what is expected of me here so long as the breath remains in my body. But a cab-horse," I sighed bitterly, as I moved from the stage-

door into the bleak and snowy street, "drops sometimes in the shafts—dead!"

Notwithstanding, after that night, the Levity saw me no more. After that night I never again sang at Mr. Binkworthy's theatre of varieties. Indeed, I never again saw the manager himself. Thenceforward we were as strangers; as though we never had met! Such is the strange uncertainty of the future, and of Fate!

I hurried along, seeing no cab, my cloak wrapped tightly about me, my fearful eyes glancing nervously to the right and to the left. The night was unutterably cold and dreary; the snow still fell, but here in the great city losing its chill purity the instant it reached the earth; the sludgy pavements were almost deserted. All the late omnibuses were full; but I recollected that there was a cab-stand not many yards farther on, and thither with beating heart I hastened. Could I escape? Was there a chance for me?

Yet no shriek of alarm left my lips when I felt my arm touched—touched timidly by some unseen hand—when a figure stole out from the shadow of a roomy doorway belonging to an empty house with broken and shuttered windows,

which adjoined a portion of the theatre I had just quitted. No! No cry, either of alarm or of surprise, broke from me; for, after what had occurred within the theatre, I had instinctively known that this would follow—that there would be no avoiding it—that I must meet it, this grisly spectre of the past, and bear with the horror of it all with what courage in the circumstances I could summon to my aid.

Nevertheless, had a corpse, starting from its coffin, suddenly touched me, I could not have shuddered more violently or have experienced a keener terror. I quailed—trembling all over—shrank into the shadow of the long-empty and most desolate-looking house; my eyes shut involuntarily, dreading what they would see; my spread hands uplifted for a moment or so as if to shield me from a blow.

“Flower—Flower,” said the well-remembered voice, humble, mild, tremulous with sorrowful entreaty, gentle as ever; “and so we meet again. How strange is life! How strange are the accidents of it! Oh, my child—though child you are no longer, but grown to a womanhood wondrously fair—speak to me, give me a word! I have been waiting and watching for you here; speak then to your poor old——”

“Father,” I said in a shuddering whisper, “in pity leave me! No; do not touch me again; but leave me in peace—if there be such a thing as peace in this world. And if—if it be that—that you still care for me, I—I ask you to prove it this instant by leaving me as I beg you. We are nothing to each other—nothing but strangers. When I left—left Moor Edge, I left you for ever—for ever and ever. I have other ties now. Never dare to trouble me again; but go!”

I had opened my horrified eyes, with my hands pressed hard over my bosom, my face as white as the falling snowflakes—still cowering backward against the wall of the forsaken house, lest my garments even should be defiled by contact with the man before me. In the pallid light from the street-lamps in our vicinity I perceived that he was regarding me with mild questioning blue eyes full of perplexity. One hand in a pleading manner was extended towards me; in the other was the black bag without which—as in the old days—he travelled nowhither. But the pure cold snow, dancing so thickly and so noiselessly earthward, was fast clothing in white the noisome ugly thing.

“Flower,” sadly said he whom once I had

known as and innocently called my "Uncle Simon," "you are very hard, my dear; I will not say unnatural, because perhaps it is only—only natural, after all, that you, having—as you told me in that message which you left behind you when you fled from Moor Edge, and indeed as is very evident to me now—at last discovered the truth, should shrink from him who always loved you so well, dear—nay who would—"

"Love—love," I gasped. "Do not, I pray you, think of that beautiful word as anything that could possibly have existence between you and me! It is not possible—not true. I ceased to care for you, to regret you, when I learned the truth. Ah, it was too cruel; too horrible!"

"Oh, Flower," said the old man very desolately, the tears beginning to trickle down his changed cheeks, "you are too hard—too hard upon me! Child, you would at least pity me—I believe you would not be so unkind—if you knew how wretched I am in my old age; how lonely I have been since you went away. The old moorland home is sadly altered since you knew it, Flower. It was always solitary, dear, I'm aware; it is worse than solitary now. Flower,

for the sake of the happy old days that are dead and gone and cannot return, let me take you by the hand—only once again, my dear—just once. Let me take your hand in mine, and hear you say ‘Uncle Simon’—just once, only once, as you used to do! A minute ago you called me ‘father.’ Why—why was that? Strange, very strange, coming from you, Flower! Why was it, dear?” he whispered plaintively. “Call me ‘Uncle Simon’ again; not——”

Nearer to me crept he; the black bag brushed my gown. I flung out my arms and passionately waved him back.

“Do not you understand me?” I said sternly. “Since we parted I have learned the truth; the whole truth. If I called you ‘father,’ I—I did not mean to. The name slipped from me unawares; you are nothing to me. Your meeting me to-night is dreadful—dreadful! I was unhappy enough, God knows, before; I am fifty times at this moment unhappier than I was. Thanks to my husband,” I cried bitterly, “I am no longer an innocent and an ignorant girl—I am a woman, with a woman’s hard experience of life. My husband—where all was gloom and darkness—has let daylight in. I have gained wisdom, and have paid dearly for the gaining of

it. That is the way of things in this world. He guessed—somehow found out—everything! He told me the truth—the truth, Simon Creedy. Do you hear? Do you comprehend? Go, go, go, then; the sight of you hurts my eyes! Let me pass; but do not touch me; I want to get home to my child.”

“Husband—child,” repeated the old man dreamily, as if my passionately-uttered words—every one of them, save those two—had not fallen upon his ears at all; “tell me something about them—your husband and your child—perhaps children? Have you more than one—tell me, Flower? Are you happy in your married life—quite happy, dear?” he said eagerly. “And—and let me hear how it is that I find you singing at that theatre place. They told me inside that you sing there every night; that—that—”

“My present life is my own—it does not concern you, Simon Creedy,” I answered wildly. “Whatever it be, whatever I may hold dear in it, it is my own affair; not yours. Evil, lost old man! I am nothing to you. I may be your child, but I have naught in my heart for you except deepest loathing; and therefore——”

A huge dark shape, but a few yards from where we stood, here advanced slowly through the whirling snow. I sprang past Simon Creedy and grasped the policeman by the arm.

"Find me a cab, will you," I panted, "and I will give you half-a-crown?"

For a few astonished seconds he stared down into my white and agitated face; and then said,—

"Certainly, 'm, I will."

He put a whistle to his lips and blew it shrilly.

"What is the matter, madam—have you been insulted?" he asked, dropping the whistle into his pocket.

"Yes—no—yes, I mean," was my incoherent reply; and, hardly conscious of what I did, I pointed to the dark doorway of the empty house.

Straightway my burly friend turned his bull's-eye full upon the shadowy entrance-place. The piercing light of it revealed Simon Creedy crouching there upon the wet doorstep; his bowed face hidden in his hands; the black bag lying unheeded upon the pavement at his feet.

With one stride the huge policeman was stooping over the abject old man. He shook him roughly by the shoulder. Simon Creedy looked up.

“Flower, Flower,” he cried—“do not leave me like this! One word, dear—after all these years, one little kind word—Flower—Flower—”

With a harsh laugh the policeman stepped back.

“Why, you old sinner—you, is it?” I heard him exclaim. “You, of all limbs o’ darkness in the world—*You!*”

The past faintness and dizziness of the theatre were returning. I felt that I could not stand unsupported. Happily at that instant a hansom drove briskly alongside the kerb-stone, and stopped quite close to me.

“Are you the fare, madam?” inquired the driver. “Some one whistled.”

“Yes.”

I told him whither to drive me; stumbled somehow into the cab; and sank back upon the padding of it with a moan of despair.

The policeman came to the cab doors; leant one arm upon them, looked in, and said significantly,—

“Do you know, ’m, who he is?”—with a

jerk of his helmet in the direction of the dark doorway.

“Yes.”

“You do ! Shall I take him into custody ?”

“No, no, no ! He—he has done nothing.”

“I understood you, madam, that he had insulted you ?”

I remembered the promised half-crown. I managed to find the money, and thrust it into the policeman's hand ; saying faintly,—

“It—it doesn't matter—let him go. And—and please tell the man to drive fast ; he knows the address.”

My head, my head—oh, the throbbing, the dull, dreadful giddiness of it ! What did it mean ? Was I going to be ill ?

My big friend touched his helmet and immediately withdrew from the vehicle. In another moment I was travelling rapidly homeward to my darling—to my little sick patient child—through the whirling white mist of the wintry night.

But a desolate cry seemed to follow me upon the breath of the wild north wind ; seemed, every now and then, with bursts of demoniac laughter, to rush by the side of the rattling cab ; and would not be shut out.

“ Flower, Flower,” wailed the old man’s voice — “ do not leave me like this after all these years, dear, not like this ! One little word,” it sobbed and laughed — “ one little kind word, dear ! Oh, Flower Flower ! ”





CHAPTER XXVIII.

“**P**LEASE, Mrs. Darkwood, 'm, there's a Mr.—a Mr. Blinkworthy, I understood him to say, at the door. See you he must and will, he says. Shall I ask him to walk in?”

“See me he can't and shall not,” was my reply, given very calmly—the calmness that is born of a great but a quiet and tearless despair. “By no means invite him an inch beyond the doorstep.”

“But, ma'am,” said Mrs. Sadler dolefully, “how am I to get rid of him? Indeed, 'm, I told him as you was just about as bad as you could be, and little missy there so ill and all too; but the gentleman fired up quite angry like, and said, ‘Pooh, she's not too bad to see me, I'll warrant! You go and tell her I said so.’ He

seems a very peppery sort of gent," sniffed Mrs. Sadler.

For a few moments I pondered the aspect of affairs ; then said,—

" Mrs. Sadler, please be good enough to go as quietly as you can into the sitting-room and lock the door opening on the passage ; make no noise if you can help it ; and then come back to me."

She left the bedroom, passing through the folding-doors, and I heard her stealthily doing in the other room what I had begged her to do.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and already growing dark. No snow was falling to-day—it had ceased during the past night ; but the sky was still leaden and low ; the atmosphere was gray and cheerless ; and the raw wind, which had shifted eastward, wailed and whistled at every keyhole and dismally rattled the window-frames both upstairs and down.

To-day my darling was too ill to get up—too weak indeed to lift her little dark head from the pillow unless my arm was placed beneath it. So she was lying in her cot near to the bedroom fire ; and I, in my dressing-gown, with my easy-chair wheeled to the cot-side, had been trying to interest her, to rouse her from her lethargy, by

reading aloud the nursery tales that the dear little soul loved best.

But it was of no use. She smiled, took her medicine without a murmur, said she was tired—so very tired to-day—and appeared to be dozing every other minute. Her cough however, I noticed, with a sense of great thankfulness, had seemed somewhat easier since the early morning.

For myself, I was ill, really ill—bodily and mentally alike; but I hardly as yet realised the fact. A sleepless, a most wretched night, the misery of my own reflections in the still dark hours before the morning dawned, had completely worn me out. I must not give way, though; dimly yet distinctly enough I was conscious of that; for Isla's sake I must bear up, be alert, and not give way. No—that of all calamities must not happen. Yet, dreary and long and hopeless as the night seemed, morning—as it ever does—came at last.

On rising, the first thing I had done was to write to Mr. Binkworthy. I would sing no more at the Levity until—until—well, until my child was well again. No earthly power should move me from her side, to Mr. Binkworthy's theatre of varieties or elsewhere, until her health was

thoroughly restored and I could once more, without anxiety, leave her to the care of strangers.

Thus determined, I had seized my pen and written hurriedly,—

“DEAR SIR,—I find it is as you feared it would be last night. I have caught cold—am downright ill. My little girl, too, is worse. Therefore, as I have now to nurse both her and myself, you must not, I am afraid, for some time to come expect me to return to the theatre. With sincere regrets, should I have caused you any inconvenience,—Believe me, yours truly,

“FLOWER DARKWOOD.”

The note was despatched through the post before ten o'clock A.M. By four in the afternoon Mr. Binkworthy in his brougham had driven over to Bentham Street and was standing upon the doorstep of Mrs. Sadler's house.

I was not surprised. I expected the visit. I had guessed there would be a tussle over the determination I had arrived at. But a hundred furious managers should not shake it. Once and for all, my mind was made up.

How thankful was I now that out of my

weekly earnings a considerable sum of money had been lodged in a bank against the coming of a day of trouble ! Had no money been hoarded, no strict economy practised, I should not now have been in a position to defy Mr. Binkworthy and his wrath. As for the future, when—when Isla was better, I had no fear of that. Should Mr. Binkworthy by-and-by refuse, which was hardly likely, to have anything more to do with me, there were other managers, in London as well as out of it, who would be only too glad of the chance to offer me an engagement.

Mrs. Sadler, looking rather frightened, came back on tip-toe from her errand in the sitting-room.

“And what shall I tell the gentleman, please, ’m ?” she whispered. “He’s thumping the step with his stick awful impatient. He do certainly seem a dreadful peppery sort,” said Mrs. Sadler again, with an anxious glance over her shoulder.

“Tell him,” I said quietly, “that if he stands there from now until to-morrow afternoon he will not see me ; neither will he come in. He has had my letter—I have nothing further to say. I am ill ; shut in my bedroom—to receive a visit either from him or from any-

body else is in the circumstances an impossibility."

Mrs. Sadler slowly left the bedroom, thoughtfully nibbling the nail of her first finger as she went. I daresay she was wondering whether she could in any wise soften the message I had given her to deliver.

When she was gone, I sprang involuntarily from my chair and locked the bedroom door also. I knew not what the manager might attempt in his angry desire for an interview.

For a long while the two voices were audible at the front door; Mr. Binkworthy's raised and indignant; Mrs. Sadler's whining and would-be conciliatory. But at last the manager departed; and with a sigh of relief I heard the wheels of his brougham roll away from Bentham Street.

"Well?" said I, turning the key again softly, and allowing my landlady to enter. "Hush—sh, my good soul! Not so loud—the child has fallen asleep again."

"Oh, he did go on," said Mrs. Sadler in a shocked whisper—"frightful! He used a lot of bad language, and that's the truth. What Mrs. Winch's niece thought next door—she was taking in the milk—I can't imagine! He

kep' on saying, Mrs. Darkwood, as you'd broken your contrack, and a good deal more that I couldn't understand. And he said too, ma'am, as he'd have a doctor's certificate from you before eight o'clock this evening, or he'd know the reason why."

"So he shall," I answered wearily, putting my hands to my head. "Is old Mr. Jones at home?"

"Oh, yes, 'm!" said Mrs. Sadler. "He's upstairs with the newspaper, sitting over his fire."

"Will you run up to him, then, Mrs. Sadler, please, and ask him to have the kindness to go round to the surgery and tell Doctor North that I particularly wish to speak to him?" said I.

I had no hesitation in asking this favour of old Mr. Jones. A dozen times a day he would creep down from his garret floor to inquire whether there was any improvement in the child's condition, or whether, in any direction whatever, there was aught that he could do to help me? I had only to mention it, said old Mr. Jones earnestly; he would do anything he could, and be glad to.

Only on that very day, at dinner-time, had the mysterious old man come shuffling down-

stairs, knocked timidly at my door, and had put into my hand a china dish of magnificent purple grapes—grapes at four or five shillings a pound! “For little missy, with her old friend’s best love,” said he. And before I could thank him, back he had shuffled upstairs again.

I was very sure that old Mr. Jones would directly take a message for me to Doctor North, whom I had of late called in to prescribe for my child, and who lived conveniently near to us in another street. The doctor, if I asked him, would at once quiet Mr. Binkworthy by certifying in the usual manner that I was, through illness or “indisposition,” wholly incapable of performing my nightly work at the theatre.

And not only did old Mr. Jones volunteer to fetch Doctor North to my lodgings; but moreover insisted later on upon himself going down to the Levity to place the certificate in the hands of Mr. Binkworthy.

At first I would not hear of this notion; for the night was wet and rawly cold. But old Mr. Jones was curiously stubborn, and would not heed the objections I put forward. With a quite hurt and stern air he buttoned up his shabby

overcoat, which seemed so much too big for his shrunken figure, and pulled the worn collar of it high about his ears. Resolutely he clapped on his shabby old beaver hat, with its nap brushed all the wrong way, and declared hurriedly, nervously, that nothing should hinder him in doing what he knew to be his duty.

"Oh, Mr. Jones," I entreated, with tears of gratitude swimming in my sad eyes, perhaps running down my wan cheeks, "do not—do not you trouble! One of Mrs. Sadler's sons, I have no doubt, will, when they come home, oblige me for once—"

"Mrs. Sadler's sons may be late in—they often are," muttered old Mr. Jones. "I am going." The mean, narrow house passage where we stood together was but poorly lighted. He looked in the feeble gas-gleam like the ghost of some little shabby old man, thought I insensibly.

"Then at any rate you must take a cab," I said, venturing to press my purse into his hand. "You are going solely on my account; and therefore I cannot allow—"

Courteously but firmly he waved the purse from him.

"You are mistaken. I—I am not going out solely on your errand, madam," murmured the

shadowy old creature, with something like real old-world dignity in the mien of him. "I have to—to call upon a friend of mine as well. I am truly happy to be of service to you at the same time."

He shuffled past me; unlatched the front door. He closed it softly; and was gone. I had never before exchanged so many words with old Mr. Jones.

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The very wheels of the omnibuses rolling by in the distance seemed to move onward with a muffled sound. People in the street outside, I fancied, hushed their voices and trod the damp pavement with care when they passed the door of Mrs. Sadler's house. In the wind to-night, as it swept round the corner of dingy Bentham Street, I heard the crying and the moaning of unearthly voices, chanting a dirge—a dirge which ere long would sink into a requiem—for the innocent soul of my darling, my beloved child, that was travelling home to its God.

She had asked whether I would let her get up to-day—had asked me to let her lie upon the sofa in the sitting-room. And so, as Doctor North had plainly assured me that "nothing could make any difference;" that was how he

put it : that she might do quite as she pleased, have just whatever she fancied ; I carried her in the afternoon—she was scarcely heavier than one of her own dolls—into the front-room, and laid her there amongst many pillows upon the couch by the fire. If she was in pain, I took her into my arms, and thus rocked her to sleep upon my breast. Well, she must go, it seemed—the dear Lord knew best.

It was now three days ago since the manager of the Levity had called at my lodgings and I had refused him admittance. He had got from me what he said he would have—my doctor's certificate ; and Mr. Binkworthy so far had troubled me no more ; though every knock at the door set my heart thumping, lest it should be some messenger sent by him from the theatre, or perhaps Mr. Binkworthy come again himself.

And nearly four days had now elapsed since I had recognised Simon Creedy amongst the Levity audience ; when the old man had waylaid me in the vicinity of the stage-door, and had so pitifully besought me—for the sake of the unalterable past—for the “ one little kind word ” that I would not, could not give him !

And for two whole days and for two whole nights I had neither taken off my clothes nor

stretched my limbs upon a bed ; my post had been by my darling's cot. Nor for many, many hours had I shed a tear ; nor swallowed solid food ; nor said a coherent prayer. My tears, I believed, were all gone ; food choked me ; and when I tried to pray I had no mastery over my words—I could only moan dumbly in an agony of grief, and dimly wonder whether God understood.

Presently the door of the sitting-room opened ; and Mrs. Sadler came noiselessly in. She had a cup of tea and some toast upon a tray. Could it then be tea-time ? Certainly it had grown very dark ; and the lamps were lighted in the misty street. Yes, indeed, said Mrs. Sadler in answer to my listless inquiry, it had already gone six by St. Saviour's clock ; and she had been waiting for me to ring.

“ And now, dear lady,” added the kind soul earnestly, “ do try and drink this tea, and swallow a mossel o' toast with it. It's beautifully strong, and there's a pinch o' green in it. It'll do you all the good in the world.”

I thanked her ; mechanically took the cup ; but shook my head at the toast. So Mrs. Sadler, sighing, set down the tray, quietly stirred the fire, and lighted the gas overhead. And then,

having lowered the blind and drawn together the faded moreen curtains, she came back to the sofa and stared compassionately down at Isla. "Poor little dearie!" she muttered. "A happy release."

My hands trembled. The tea-spoon dropped into my lap.

"Has anyone been spreading straw on the road outside?" I asked nervously.

"Oh, no, 'm!" replied Mrs. Sadler. "Did you want it done, though? If so, Charlie will be in in a minute, and then I'll send him round to the mews—or perhaps old Mr. Jones 'll go directly. I will step up and ask him; shall I?"

"Do not trouble—I—I don't think it matters," I answered dully. "It sounds to me exactly as if some one had been spreading straw in the road—that is all. Everything seems so—so muffled."

"It's your pore head," said Mrs. Sadler pityingly. "It aches and hums badly, I've no doubt. What you want, 'm, is rest and sleep—that's what you want more than anything."

"I daresay. But, if I fall asleep, I hope and pray that I may never wake up again—I mean, here. It would be beautiful for me and my child to wake up together in a kindlier world

than this. I can imagine nothing sweeter," said I dreamily.

Mrs Sadler, feebly shocked, replied—"Oh, no, 'm! Don't say that; it's wicked." And by-and-by she left us alone once more. It was an hour or two later perhaps when she looked in again. She was then going out, it appeared; for she had put on her rusty black bonnet and shawl, and had a canvas bag—her marketing-bag she called it—on her arm.

"I am obliged to go out, 'm," she whispered—"just to the grocer's and the pork-butcher's, and to call on a neighbour over the way. Is there anything I can do for you, Mrs Darkwood?"

"Thank you, nothing."

Mrs. Sadler, scarcely breathing, crept to the couch-side.

"How is she?" she asked.

"I can see no difference."

Mrs. Sadler shook her head mournfully.

"Poor little angel! She will not live till morning."

"God knows!" I answered desolately.

"Well, 'm, Bob and Charlie are both underneath"—pointing to the carpet—"playing cribbage. If you want anything, though I won't be gone longer than I can help, you've only to call

to them at the top of the kitchen stairs—they'll hear. And old Mr. Jones is at home too."

"Very well. Should I want them, I will call them," I calmly replied.

With a sniff and a sigh the landlady vanished as noiselessly as she had appeared, murmuring—"Oh, dear—oh, dear, if she'd only take and have a good fit o' crying, it 'ud do her all the good in the world! It isn't natural—it can't be—to bear up agen death like this."

I do not know how long Mrs. Sadler had been gone; it may have been an hour; it may have been only a quarter of one; but presently there came another soft "tap, tap, tap," at my sitting-room door. I supposed that Mrs. Sadler had returned from her shopping.

"Come in," said I.

But the tapping was repeated; and no one entered. So I rose unsteadily, with a sensation of sudden giddiness—I dare say I was weak from my vigil and fasting—and opened the door myself. I peered cautiously forth. I could see no one.

"Who is there?" I breathed, trembling a little.

Then, standing in the dimmest and shadowest

part of the passage, with its one sickly gas-jet near to the fanlight of the front-door, I discerned old Mr. Jones. His long and shabby overcoat was buttoned close up to his chin ; a gray woollen comforter was twisted about his neck. His scant wisps of silvery hair, I noticed, were uncovered, and rested upon the cloudy comforter ; but his shabby old hat and stick were in his hand ; it was plain that he was going out. Perhaps Mrs. Sadler had said something to him about the straw, and he was now going to the mews.

“ Old Mr. Jones ! ” was my involuntary exclamation.

“ Yes,” he said.

“ Do you—do you want me ? ” I inquired wonderingly.

“ I should like to hear from your own lips whether it is true,” he murmured ; his gray head bent so low that in the passage-gloom I could no longer see his face. “ Mrs. Sadler says the child is dying—cannot—cannot live until the morning ? ”

I smote my hands together, and pressed them against my bosom.

“ Old man,” I cried—and my voice in my own ears sounded strange and unearthly, like those other spirit-voices in the wind—“ you torture

me ; you are cruel ! Cannot you see that my distress and anguish are insupportable—that my grief is killing me ? Why should you come here to stare at my breaking heart ? ”

“ Heaven forbid ! ” he answered, as if to himself. With his usual shambling gait he moved to the street-door. “ Yes,” he muttered, “ it is time now. In distress, broken-hearted, no friends near her in this terrible hour ! He would blame me if he were not told. I will go. Yes, yes ; I can see it is the proper thing to do. I promised to do my duty, and the promise shall be kept. Afterwards, I know, he will say that I did right.”

I had dropped my face into my hands, and was leaning heavily against the passage wall. Yet no tears came to my hot dry eyes ; though a hard gasping sob shook me roughly now and then.

When I swept my hair from my aching temples and looked dazedly around me, I was alone in the poorly-lit passage. Old Mr. Jones was not there. Whither had he gone—the strange, mysterious old man ? What did he mean, if he really meant anything ? He was, I recollected, for ever muttering and saying queer things to himself, after the fashion of

solitary and contemplative old folk who have seen better days perhaps in their time.

The next instant I had forgotten old Mr. Jones, his odd ways, his odd talk, and was back by my darling's side. She had moaned twice—was turning restlessly on the pillows. Her eyes were open; but I perceived that she did not know me.

Upon my knees I flung myself by the sofa and gathered my child to my heart. My touch seemed to quicken her memory. A faintly-passing smile answered my passionate yearning gaze.

“Isla dearest, it is mamma! Darling, say that you know mamma! You must have a little wine, a little jelly, now that you are awake, because—because, you know, dear,” said I incoherently, “it will make you well, give you strength; and then—and then, Isla, we will go right away to the sea again, and will never come back any more to cold foggy London; but will live always by the sea—always, darling, you and I together, Isla; and—and will not that be beautiful, dear?”

“But I am so tired this morning,” she said—“so tired! May I—may I ask *him* to—to carry me up to the cliff, mamma?”

With a stifled cry of alarm I arose. I knew of what, of whom she was thinking. It was terrible to see her like this. I got her to swallow a spoonful of wine ; but she could not take the jelly. See Doctor North once more I must ; there might be hope—just a glimmer of real hope yet ; he might do something—something—although he had told me in the afternoon that all that it was possible in her case to do had then by him been done. Still I would see him once more that night. I could not rest until I had done this. I must see him in the house again—and that at once !

I rushed to the kitchen stairway. I called down into the dark place,—

“Mrs. Sadler—Mrs. Sadler, I want you to run to the surgery—to fetch Doctor North. I want him immediately. Old Mr. Jones is gone out somewhere, or I would not trouble you.”

No answer. Evidently the landlady had not returned.

“Is *anybody* downstairs ?” I called piteously. “If so, please answer. I want some one to fetch Doctor North. I cannot, dare not leave the house myself.”

I paused—held my breath. Dead silence. My own voice and the slow ghostly “tick—

tock ; tick—tock ” of some wheezy labouring old eight-day clock below alone disturbed the gloomy quiet. Indeed the house everywhere seemed horribly still.

It flashed into my mind that Mrs. Sadler's sons were there, but that they had in all likelihood fallen asleep. I must awaken them somehow. One of them must go for Doctor North.

I groped my way down the steep staircase, the stale smell of herrings that had been cooked for tea greeting my nostrils as I descended, and found these area regions utterly forsaken. No soul was there. The gas in the kitchen was turned downward to a mere blue glimmer ; the fire was nearly extinguished. An old cribbage-board, a pack of soiled cards, an empty Bass's ale-bottle, and a couple of common tumblers littered the table in the centre of the room. That was all !

Tired of their game, Mrs. Sadler's sons, it appeared, had also quitted the house, to seek livelier recreation, perhaps, elsewhere ; probably fancying that old Mr. Jones was still in his attic parlour. Their mother, believing that the young men were where she had left them before going out, was doubtless gossiping com-

fortably with her “neighbour over the way;” and old Mr. Jones, still absent, had gone I knew not whither.

So I was in the house alone—alone with my dying child! Merciful Heaven, pity me! What should I do?

Hark!

Some one was knocking at the front door—a loud bold knock which, on that sad night, was a jarring agony to hear. Whoever it was outside in the street must be in ignorance of what was happening within the house—that pale Death, who is so cruel and yet so kind, was hovering about the couch of my child.

As swiftly as I could, in my trembling haste stumbling up the dark steep stairs, I gained the passage and then the entrance-door; wildly eager to get it open before the loud knocking should be repeated.

My hand was extended; it was upon the latch. But apprehension suddenly turned me sick; and my hand dropped nerveless to my side.

It was Mr. Binkworthy—it could be no one else!

Ah, well; humbly, if need were, upon my knees, I would ask him, beseech him to forgive

me—to be Christian enough, if he had a man's heart within his breast, to run to the surgery and bring back Doctor North!

He could not refuse—oh, surely not!—when he should see what genuine grief was mine; when he should learn that my child, my darling, my all, was indeed that night passing from earth to heaven.

With a curse the man outside once more seized the knocker. I wrenched open the door and cried hoarsely,—

“Stop!”

At first I did not recognise him. His back being towards the street-lamp, his face was in shadow. But in the next instant, powerless to check the scream which rushed to my white lips, I had staggered, gasping and half senseless, backward to the passage wall.

“Periwinkle,” said a too-familiar voice—the thick jaunty voice of one who is not wholly sober—“how are you? Glad—glad to remark that—that you seem overjoyed to see me! That's well—in fact as it should be, my dear; for I am come to take care of you again. D'ye hear—'m, eh? So I think I'll walk in.”

The man was my husband—Daryl Darkwood.



CHAPTER XXIX.

WITH one hand pressed over my eyes, with the other, like a blind woman, I groped my way back to the sitting-room; and there sank helplessly upon the sofa by Isla. I heard Daryl shut the street-door; and then he followed me in.

I groaned; he noisily tossed his hat on to the top of the piano, and flung himself into an easy-chair by the window.

With an effort I recovered my stricken wits; my failing strength; and, with passion but ill-controlled, I turned towards my husband.

“Will you have the goodness, the humanity, to be quiet, Daryl?” I said in a trembling undertone. “Isla is ill—dying they tell me. Now that you are here—though Heaven knows why you have come, how you found me—will you go and— Oh, Daryl!” I broke off, no anger

quivering in my voice now ; it was tremulous with pleading, humility, and a deep despair—“go and bring Doctor North here, will you ? I am frightened—the child is very ill—not conscious—I am in the house alone. He—the doctor—lives close by ; you will see the red lamp——”

“Ah,” he threw in, with a slight hiccoughing sound, but as coolly as if we had parted only on the day before, “I was told yesterday that the youngster was ailing a bit—had been seedy for some time past ! But, you know, Flower, my dear, you always took fright without cause wherever the child was concerned—exaggerated trifles, made mountains out of molehills—you know you did. If she had got just the suspicion of a feverish cold, you were immediately convinced that she was down with scarlet fever. Dying ? Not she ! That’s like you, Periwinkle. Where is she ? Oh, I see—you’ve got her with you ; covered up there ! I’ll come over and have a look at her in a minute. But, as I was saying, when old Binkworthy told me yesterday——”

“Ha !”

“What’s the matter ?” inquired Daryl, smiling indolently.

"It was that man then who gave you my address," said I in a husky whisper—"who told you where you would find me?"

"Right; he did," replied my husband, with another hateful smile.

"The villain!" I hissed, my hands locked about my knees, my wild dry eyes fixed upon the fire before me. "It was his malice—his way of making me suffer. I might have guessed what to expect of him—might have known that he would not spare me, after—after my—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Daryl laughed, in the old boisterous style. "'The villain,' eh; that's how you thank a fellow, is it, for kindly handing you over to the lawful protection of your husband?"

"You are my husband no longer," I murmured doggedly.

"So! The law, as it now stands, I fancy, would take a different view of the case," replied Daryl affably.

"Daryl, I would rather die than live with you again," I said in hollow accents, and with my haggard gaze still bent upon my smouldering fire of wood. "You deceived me abominably; unpardonably; to—to say nothing further. You turned me adrift; were only too glad when a sham opportunity occurred—"

“If I remember rightly, you turned yourself adrift; didn’t you? I am sure I never expressed any wish that you should go. You went, my dear Flower, purely of your own accord.”

“It was impossible to remain an hour longer with you after—after I had learned—after your despicable and unmanly conduct,” I said haughtily. “No true woman would have endured it. Any woman on earth worthy the name would have left you as I did.”

“You choose your words at random, Periwinkle,” observed Daryl plaintively. “Despicable! Unmanly!” He shrugged his shoulders. “Come, now, isn’t that a trifle harsh of you? ’Pon my soul, I think it is, when I am so willing—why, you can see that I am—to forgive and to forget; to let all unpleasant by-gones be by-gones, don’t you know, and—”

I held up my hand—I have been more than once told that it is a trick of mine—with a gesture of passionate scorn and disgust.

“I do not want your forgiveness, Daryl. I never in any wise erred to require, to justify forgiveness from you; and as for letting by-gones be by-gones—faugh!” I exclaimed wearily. “Your motive for seeking me here is as clear as noonday. You have of course learnt at the

theatre that I have for some time past been in the receipt of a considerable weekly salary, paid to me by Mr. Binkworthy. It is perfectly true—I own it; and therefore it has occurred to you that I am, in the circumstances, a wife worth claiming. A wife that can earn her thirty or forty pounds a week is a person worth looking after—a wife worth forgiving when she has done nothing to forgive. You are wondrously magnanimous, Daryl. You come here for my money; not for me.”

I dropped my head desolately to the pillow beside Isla's. She was asleep; or seemed to be. But I was determined that Doctor North should see her once more that night.

“Oh, my darling, my darling,” I breathed, “if we might only die together! If Heaven were pitiful, He would let us go hence together!”

“You put it coarsely,” I heard Daryl saying, still in that absurdly plaintive voice of his which he could assume whenever he chose. “I grant you, Flower, that I want money—I want money badly. In fact, at the present moment, I haven't a sixpence in the whole world to call my own—haven't indeed. Gave cabby my last half-crown. Rosenberg returned to his native Schloss and his sausages a couple of days or so ago. By-the-

way, did I tell you?—it was he who, one night by himself, looking in for a lark at the Levity, recognised in the popular Madame Fleurette my own lost talented wife, Mrs. Daryl Darkwood; and—and— Well, Rosenberg's gone, you see; and altogether luck with me of late has been deucedly bad. Can't understand it—it's beastly hard. I am not accustomed to this cursed ill-luck. But when things are at their worst they mend, 'tis said; and so, Periwinkle, my dear, as I remarked just now, you must be sensible, and let all past mistakes and small unpleasantnesses be exactly as though they never had happened with us. In short, we'll make it up—kiss and be friends; eh? We'll spend a quiet Christmas together—here, if you like, melancholy as it all seems; or wherever you please, Flower—and hope for better luck with the New Year."

As I deigned no answer, nor lifted my head from the child's pillows, Daryl rather unsteadily rose from his seat, though he was more sober now than he had been when he arrived, and came over to the couch-side.

"Hullo, Tupp'ny," he cried cheerily; "how are you? Don't you know me, little 'un—'m, eh?"

I was upon my feet then in an instant. How

I managed it—so weak and spent as I was—in truth I do not know. But despite his height and strength, I struck my hands against Daryl's chest and thrust him backward to the arm-chair he had vacated.

"How—how dare you, at such a time?" I said hoarsely. "Have you no grain of tenderness, no natural feeling—have you no heart, no spark of manhood left in you? Your brutal roughness will kill her," I said, trembling with indignation at his callous mien in this hour which to me was an hour of such supreme sorrow.

"I wasn't going to eat her—don't be frightened!" said my husband sullenly. As I had feared he would, he had disturbed the child. She stirred uneasily; opened her eyes; uttered the little pathetic moan I knew so well, and said just audibly,—

"Is Mr. Eversleigh come yet, mamma?"

"No, my dearest," I said very simply, very quietly; for I somehow felt—although I could not see them, my back being turned to him—that Daryl's brilliant dark eyes, with a savage sneering light within them, were at that moment fixed upon me. "It is papa; Mr. Eversleigh, you know, Isla, never comes here."

To any further, to any more direct explanation I would not condescend ; no matter what vile suspicion, awakened by the child's innocent delirium, might be passing through the bad heart of him who called himself my husband.

"Shall we—shall we never see Mr. Eversleigh any more, mamma?" whispered Isla.

"Some day, perhaps, dear," I answered brokenly. "I cannot tell."

Daryl burst out laughing, and struck the floor with his heel.

"I suppose," said he, "your old"—here an insulting pause—"your old friend frequently looks in to—well, to inquire after his favourite, the youngster—eh?" drawled my husband.

Straight into his handsome insolent eyes looked I.

"You may think just whatever you please, Daryl," I said, as calmly as I could. "The child's mind is wandering ; you know it. However, you have wilfully misjudged me often in the past ; you are at liberty to misjudge me again. It does not matter ; I do not mind—now."

"All women are alike," observed he, with something of his old airy manner ; quite aware that it would in no wise serve his purpose to quarrel with me to-night.

"They are. They discover, sooner or later, poor souls—poor fools!—that there are few good men in the world," I said, as I held another spoonful of wine to Isla's lips.

Daryl threw back his head and laughed pleasantly. Isla, with hers upon my breast, was murmuring—"I am so tired, mamma—so tired!"

"Daryl," I said more patiently, "may I now beg you to go and call Doctor North? The surgery is quite near—a red lamp is over the surgery door. It will not take you five minutes. Daryl, do go, please—please go!" And I explained to him precisely where Doctor North lived.

"Oh, I'll go!" he said leisurely. He got up as he spoke and put on his hat. I then for the first time noticed that the hat in style was new and fashionable; as were his clothes. Certainly, for a man with no money, my husband was remarkably well-dressed. But many a West-End tradesman—so I learned some while afterwards—was at that time anxious to discover the whereabouts of Daryl Darkwood. "I think you might offer a fellow a drink, Flower," he observed reproachfully, "before he goes."

"I have nothing to offer you. At least, there is some port-wine on the sideboard—nothing else."

“Have you no brandy in the place?” he inquired.

“None that I can give you. The small quantity that I am never without I regard as a medicine—an invaluable restorative not to be wasted.”

“Well, you know what I’ve told you,” he said lightly. “You can lend me a sovereign, of course?”

Then I did a foolish thing; but I did it without reflection. I was so feverishly eager to see him depart on his errand that, at the moment of committing it, the folly of my thoughtless act entirely failed to strike me. When it was too late, I realised that I had acted unwisely.

I drew out my purse and laid it upon the table.

“Take that, if you like,” I said. “Only have pity on me and make haste.”

He unfastened the purse and counted its contents.

“A couple of sovereigns; some silver; and a latch-key,” said he. “Is that all you have?”—dropping the purse into his pocket.

“Every farthing that I have in the house. With the key you can let yourself in when you return.”

“But you have more elsewhere?” said my husband boldly.

“Yes.”

“Good night, Tupp’ny,” he called out from the passage. But the child did not hear him; or at all events she took no notice of her father’s light farewell. “Oh, by-the-bye,” said Daryl abruptly, reappearing at the sitting-room door—“I presume you can give me a shake-down somewhere or other, Flower?”

“A bed here, do you mean?”

“Yes; I mean a bed here.”

“Impossible,” I answered dully.

“Oh, curse it! Why not?”

“Every room in the house is occupied,” I replied—“upstairs and down.”

“Is there a decent tavern, I wonder, to be found in this beastly locality?” grumbled Daryl.

“I do not know. I dare say. But why cannot you go back to Mrs. Ramage’s?” said I apathetically.

“Because I cannot—and that’s enough. What’s more, how the devil do you know that I came from Mrs. Ramage’s?” he answered brusquely. And then he went.

The clock in St. Saviour’s steeple was chiming a quarter to ten as Daryl Darkwood shut the street-door behind him and strode off to summon Doctor North. Would he—Daryl—be long in finding the surgery? I prayed not.

I had some time before heard Mrs. Sadler's sons come in and go to bed. But the mother herself—in her doleful fashion an inveterate gossip whensoever opportunity came in her way—was still out; and the house had grown deadly quiet again.

The “drawing-room floor” was rented by two commercial travellers, intimate friends, who were occasionally absent from Bentham Street for several days together. Like old Mr. Jones and myself, they had their own latch-keys; and so, as their hour of arrival was invariably very late, and their hour of departure always very early, I knew scarcely anything of these two men—had never once seen either of them. Mrs. Sadler however had twice or thrice gratuitously informed me that her “drawing-room lodgers” were “perfeck gentlemen;” and there my knowledge of them ended.

Neither had old Mr. Jones yet come in, which for him was really extraordinary. Unlike Mrs. Sadler, the old man was no gossip. I did not believe that he could boast of a single chatting acquaintance in the neighbourhood of the house where he lodged. He visited none of the numerous public-houses near; was in bed as a rule by half-past nine; and—yes—hark! There

was St. Saviour's chiming again and about to strike ten o'clock.

Daryl had already been gone a quarter of an hour.

Where could he be? Doctor North's house was so close, so easy to find, being well within a stone's-throw of the corner of Bentham Street, that it was absurd for an instant to imagine that one could lose one's way in going thither. Besides, I had made Daryl clearly understand which turning to take and what was the number of the doctor's house; and, even supposing his memory should fail him, anyone in the street would direct him afresh.

And the winged minutes flew by; the wheezy old clock downstairs seemed to labour and tick more loudly than ever; the white wood ashes dropped to the hearth like the sad leaves falling earthward in autumn. There once more went the chimes of St. Saviour—a quarter past ten! No Mrs. Sadler; no old Mr. Jones; no Daryl; no Doctor North. Where could they all be?

The silence and the loneliness of the house were dreadful. I began to feel horribly nervous—I cannot tell why—stupidly frightened. The shadows in the corners of the room took fearful shapes; and seemed, with weird antics, to be

grimacing at me through the gloom. I stirred the fire and put on more wood—the blaze of it might chase away those horrid shapes upon the wall.

The excitement caused by Daryl's unlooked-for and startling appearance in Bentham Street had given me a temporary but an unnatural strength and courage. Now the reaction was quickly following, and I once more began dimly to realise that fasting and anxiety, sleeplessness and sorrow, had cruelly weakened me, and that I was feeling downright ill. My head, indeed, in one minute, felt heavy as lead; in the next, feather-light, with a blinding giddiness that was intolerable. Was I going mad? Oh, no—not that—not that! I would eat something—that would be wise. I had fasted too long—it was foolish. Doctor North would arrive directly; he must not find me like this, in a state of utter nervousness and collapse.

With uncertain steps I went over to the side-board. Upon it, forgotten by Mrs. Sadler, stood a loaf of bread on a pink-and-white china plate, with a large black-handled table-knife lying by the side of it.

I drank a glass of port, and managed to eat with it a crust of bread. As I set down the empty wine-glass a sound in the bedroom reached my

ear ; it was as if some one was laughing—a low mocking laugh—behind the folding-doors.

The roots of my hair grew damp ; my forehead too. I could hear the thumping of my own heart as I stood there ; breathless ; listening intently. Horribly frightened as I was, I seized a bedroom candlestick, lighted the candle, and moved swiftly and noiselessly into the other room. But no creature was there.

I looked under the bed. I peered into every corner. Nobody—nothing !

It was diseased imagination—acute nervousness—I wearily told myself as I shut and now locked the folding-doors ; unless it be, as some folk maintain, that both good and evil spirits do inhabit the air around us. Assuredly that, if either, was an invisible spirit of evil which had laughed in the other room ? Nothing holy could have uttered a sound at once so mocking and so unearthly !

Morbid imagination ; unhealthy fancy ? Yes—have I not said so ? Nevertheless I shivered violently. Oh, my head—how strange it felt ! Now so heavy ; now so light ; now so burning hot—now so curiously—

“Mamma,” said Isla’s feeble little voice from the sofa, “I am so cold—so very cold, mamma.

Will you take me on your lap? I—I shall be warmer then.”

Ere the weak little voice had ceased its plaint I was with her; my arms held her passionately to my bosom; my face rested upon hers. Yes, sweet little soul, as she said, she was very cold. Her snowdrop cheek was chill as marble itself; but—but I had no fear of it; the warmth of my own body would enter hers, and she herself would grow warm again by-and-by.

Where was Daryl? Why did not he hurry homeward, and bring with him Doctor North? Let me think—let me remember if I could! Had he been gone five minutes or an hour—one hour or three? Stay! Perhaps it had all been a trick of my sick fancy; like the horrid demon laugh behind the folding-doors; and Daryl had never in reality been within miles of Bentham Street? His seeming presence there in my sitting-room was after all nothing in the world but a vivid and most painful dream—could that be it? Perhaps. And yet—and yet, surely I had seen him, spoken to him, touched him? Surely it was Daryl Darkwood in the flesh—the selfish and living Daryl Darkwood—who had appeared before me that night?

The clock aloft in St. Saviour’s spire was strik-

ing now. What melancholy chimes they were at night! Eleven! Was it eleven; or really midnight? How quiet it all was—how chilly the room was growing! How strangely soothing was the silence of the night—how full of unfathomable mystery! I have somewhere read—I cannot remember where—that God, in the darkness, to one on earth, seems always very far away. It has never, though, seemed to me like this. Ever in the dark, more than in the light, the Creator, I have somehow felt, has been then most friendly and near.

Did I actually sleep—lose all consciousness, all sense of pain; albeit for a few brief blessed moments only? If I did, oh, it is no wonder! So worn with watching, so weary, so weak, so wretched with every bright hope gone, it is no wonder that oblivion stole mercifully over me and eased me, just for a little space, of the burthen it was my lot to bear!

And yet an oblivion—ah me!—too transient.

He who knows all knows best. My time for going hence was not yet come. Isla must go on the dark journey alone. His will, not mine, be done; but how hard to say “Amen”!

As tranquilly as I had lost all sense of suffering did I as gently awaken to a consciousness of

the bitter, bitter truth. Oh, cruel life ! Oh, kind Death !

Safe clasped within my arms was the child—but my darling lay dead upon my breast.

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I heard him, with bungling hand, putting the latch-key to the lock. I heard the door go jarring against the wall, and himself come stumbling over the mats in the entrance-place.

With wild dry eyes full of pain and loathing I sat immovable, staring at the sitting-room door. Like a woman petrified I sat there upon the sofa ; keeping guard over my dead child.

I had covered her with a shawl—lightly—as if she had still been sleeping ; and had drawn it over the small quiet face—so white, so beautiful in restful death ; and now I was waiting—there was nothing else to do—waiting—waiting—yet for what ?

The door opened. Daryl came in. I did not speak—I did not stir. But my eyes were upon him and followed his every movement.

He could not stand without support ; and rolled at once into the arm-chair by the window. He must have had a bad fall or two upon the pavement or in the roadway ;

for I noticed that his hat was crushed and his fine clothes were muddy.

In the old familiar way he sprawled back in the chair, with his hands plunged down into his pockets, and his long legs stretched widely apart over the carpet.

It struck me that he was paler than he was wont to be on an occasion such as the present ; and he was tugging savagely at an end of his heavy swart moustache.

"I say, I couldn't find that doctor of yours," he muttered. I knew however that he lied—knew well enough now that he had never even tried to find Doctor North's house. But I did not say so. Thrice I essayed to speak ; and thrice my tongue refused to obey me.

"I say, do y' hear?" hiccoughed Daryl. "I've been looking for a bed—looking everywhere—and for—and for that dam doctor fella' too. Couldn't find the man anywhere—couldn't, 'pon my soul !"

I rose. I went over to him. With a sudden return of that temporary and unnatural strength which had before helped me, I gripped him by the wrist and dragged him to his feet.

He swore at me.

"Come and see !" I said. How weird and

hollow, I thought, was the sound of my own voice !

I led him to the sofa ; and uncovered the child's face.

In silence I pointed to it, still clutching his unwilling arm ; thus I held him prisoner.

“Why, she's only—only asleep. You're too—too theatrical, Periwinkle, my dear,” he said, with a callousness, a tipsy jauntiness which set my heart ablaze. “I 'spose now you've got a taste that way—it's only natural.”

“That's not sleep, Daryl. That is death.”

He laughed thickly but uneasily.

“Oh, come,” he was beginning ; “that's like you, Flower—”

“You have killed her,” I went on in the same even hollow tone. “You are a murderer. You could have brought Doctor North hither in a few minutes, had you pleased, and he might have saved her ; there was a chance—we cannot tell. But you did not ; you disregarded the errand which meant life or death, and went elsewhere on a low debauch. Behold your handiwork, Daryl Darkwood—you have murdered her, my child, my darling, my all ! Just as in the old days, at that lone old house upon the moor, where you first found me, innocent, happy, and

free, you robbed me of, killed—ay, for a long, long while I have guessed it, though I have never told you so—you killed my little dumb faithful mongrel friend, so have you now—”

With a fearful oath he smote me from him.

“Get out!” he shouted; and staggered back to the convenient arm-chair.

There he lay, with his arms dangling over the leather sides of it, scowling at me from beneath his dark brows, and breathing curses “not loud, but deep.”

I bent over my child and kissed her marble cheek; then reverently again covered the little white face that was the face of an angel now. Oh, Death, dear Death, you are kind and merciful—majestic, beautiful, unutterably sweet!

I never comprehended until now—not until now. How false, how foolish, to call you cruel; when in truth you are most pitiful and kind!

And again from my abiding place at the couch-foot I turned my wild and haggard eyes upon Daryl Darkwood; bending forward as I sat, my elbow upon my knee, and my chin resting firmly upon my clenched hand.

His head had drooped; his moustache swept his breast; he breathed harshly with many a guttural sound—he was fast locked in tipsy slumber.

And this was the man to whom I was chained; who had found me out; who had come to claim me—his own property—and who would make me work for him like any galley-slave whilst he lived ignobly upon the gold I earned.

And he was a murderer to boot. His brutal neglect of right and duty—it was thus that I reasoned with myself on that mad, sad night—had slain my child; the little one that was my darling, my all.

A murderer! And did it not say in the Scripture, “An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth; a life for a life”? And who should gainsay that—Heaven’s own command?

To be chained eternally to this bad and selfish man, from whom, it appeared, there was for me no escape—great Heaven, what a fate! Should I submit to it; submit to it without a struggle? Should I?—should I tamely bow my neck to his tyrannical yoke, writhe beneath the tyranny of his lazy masterfulness, and yet strike no bold and desperate blow to gain the freedom I coveted?

There he was before me—at my mercy!—in slumber profound; helpless; as unconscious of the present and its surroundings as the little dead child at my side—utterly at my mercy!

Should I kill him, then—kill him, and be free?

Should I do this thing; and at the same time rid both myself and society of a monster of selfishness and cruelty—a man who was not worthy to live and eat, because he would not work for his daily bread so long as others would toil for it and win it for him?

But—but I had loved him very dearly once—very dearly; and he was the father of my child.

He was my husband—my husband. Yes; say what I might, he was that; and yet—and yet—

My fierce strained gaze travelled slowly from the sleeping man and wandered instinctively over to the sideboard. There still were the pink-and-white china plate; the loaf of bread; the large black-handled table-knife—— Ha!

Would that knife, I fell to wondering, serve me as a weapon? I remembered that, for a miracle, it was sharp—the sharpest perhaps in the house. Would it do—would it? Could I, if I tried, kill Daryl with that shining black-handled knife?

I had risen very cautiously. I had crept across the room to the sideboard. There, with a hurried scared glance over my shoulder at Daryl, I snatched up the knife and hid the horrid thing in the folds of my gown.

As cautiously I moved to his side—stealthily, like an animal approaching its prey; looked at him long and intently.

Could I do it?—dared I?

Should I venture to feel where his heart was beating—the exact spot—and drive the knife in there? No; his clothes were thick—the blade of it might twist aside; shiver; and break. Then he would awake; discover me in the act red-handed! And what would happen then?

It would be better, wiser, to do it, since it must be done, in some other way that was more sure; but how?

Yes; I could wind my hand amongst his beautiful thick soft hair, and, clutching a handful of those dusky locks, draw his head suddenly backward over the chair; so that, his brown throat well bared, it—it would be easy then! That was where the knife should be driven in.

But after all—after all—he was my husband; my dead child's father; and I had loved him very dearly—once! And then something—I know not what—prompted me, lest a gentle farewell kiss should awaken him, to kneel very softly by the side of him, and as softly to lay my cheek against his knee. “Daryl, forgive me—forgive

me!" I believe I whispered with a sob. Kind Heaven, forgive me too! It must be done—I must be free; my darling's death must be avenged.

I stood up—stood resolutely over him; and drew my weapon swiftly from the folds of my skirt.

My breath came hard; my teeth were set; my hand was firm.

Yet what if he should cry out—cry out fearfully? For strong men like Daryl do not die easily; especially when— But, no; that should not be the case. I would not bungle in my bloody work. I would plunge the knife into him—fatally, surely homeward. He should have no time to shriek.

And so, without a tremor, I seized him by his hair; seized him thus with my left hand, and dragged his dark head well back; and then—and then his dusky throat was bare for the stroke.

In the same instant I flung high my right arm—high, well out from the shoulder—and the cold steel gleamed and glittered in the air. My burning eyes quailed not; my burning right hand faltered not.

Strike!

In another moment—one brief moment more—Daryl would be dead ; and I should be free.

But that swift descending arm of mine was snatched into an invisible grip ; a grip of iron ; and from my nerveless and imprisoned hand the gleaming knife dropped straightway to the floor. Horrified faces—horrified voices—seemed all at once to fill and to float through the room ; and once more I heard the mocking demon laughter behind the folding-doors.

Some one—a man’s voice—said, “ Thank God, I am not too late ! ” and it sounded like the welcome voice of an old friend, heard after the silence of many years.

Was it—could it be the voice of Leigh Eversleigh ? I fancied so.

With a crashing sound in my ears, I fell, I believe, heavily against the speaker ; but my fall was stopped by strong sustaining arms.

Then a great darkness, like the darkness of death, swept over me ; and my soul passed thence into the land of shadows.



BOOK III.

—o—

RED KNIGHTS.

“We should not look mournfully over the past.”

James Hain Friswell.

“How could I help loving you beyond measure, with all your care and tenderness for me, joined to so much charm?”—*Madame de Sabran.*

“You see each grief is noted ;

Yet it was better so—

I can rejoice to-day—the pain

Was over, long ago.”

Adelaide Anne Procter.



CHAPTER XXX.

IT was a bright late March day, with a fresh but not a cold wind—was that one on which Aurora, Viscountess Tracy, came in her luxurious carriage to Bentham Street and carried me off to Arley Bridge.

“Thank Heaven, the crisis, the danger is past,
And the lingering illness is over at last!”

—and my soul had returned from that dim shadow-land whither, into silence, upon dark mysterious wings, it had been borne, now so many long weeks gone by.

But not into eternal night. After much anxious watching and waiting, wan light had flickered through the gloom, and day for me had at length dawned again.

It is strange—there are, I think, few experiences stranger—from a trance, as it were, to once more awaken into life, and to know that a

portion of it, at any rate so far as oneself is concerned, is without memory—a blank ; a curious state of things suggesting perhaps a volume, a life-story, faultily bound, from which several pages are missing.

I remember very clearly opening my eyes one day and finding Aurora sitting by the bedside. I thought at once that it was her first visit to me since I had been stricken by my dangerous illness. I soon learnt however that I was wrong.

That must have been in February ; towards the end of the month ; or it may have been about the middle of it. I do not think that she allowed me to speak at all on that day ; I believe, indeed, that she held up her hand and said “ Hush—s—h ! ” adding—“ If you dare to utter a syllable—if you do not lie there as quiet as a mouse—I’ll go away this very minute, and never come to see you any more.”

Yet often after that I would open my eyes, and there would be Aurora sitting by the pillows ; and the delicious things she invariably brought with her—jellies, sweet puddings, choice wines, dainty dishes of all kinds—from Arley Bridge were really enough to stock a small shop for a confectioner.

But by-and-by a day did actually arrive—and this must have been in March—when Doctor North gave me full permission to sit up in bed and talk; to talk, of course, in moderation. Of course, too, there must be no excitement, was the doctor's kindly stipulation.

I am inclined to believe—that is, should I ever have doubted it—that constant attendance in a sick-room will sometimes be the means of creating in the breast of a nurse a true regard and affection for the helpless soul under her care.

At any rate, on that noteworthy day, after Doctor North had left the house, Mrs. Sadler, in her familiar rusty black, crept in, leant over my pillows, and in a quite motherly fashion kissed me upon the forehead. And she cried a little, and held my weak white hand to her bosom, and whispered in a choked voice,—

“Oh, my pore dear lady, I am that glad—that thankful, you can't think, to hear as you're getting along so nicely! I let the doctor out just now, and he says that you'll gain strength daily if we'll only take care of you. As if we wouldn't! Oh, ma'am, it's been a weary terrible time; but the worst part, thank Heaven, is over!”

"You're very, very good," I murmured.

And then Mrs. Sadler set quietly to work and began bathing my hands and my face in eau-de-Cologne and water; and she brushed the hair from my temples, and straightened the creases in the bed-clothes, with a deftness and a tenderness of touch that one perhaps would scarcely have expected to find in so poor and doleful a creature as Mrs. Sadler.

So little do we comprehend the hearts and so apt are we to underrate the capabilities of those who are daily with us.

"It does indeed seem a shame," observed Mrs. Sadler, softly "to have cut it so cruel short—such beautiful hair too!"

"My hair, do you mean?" said I languidly. "Have they cut it very short then?"

"Oh, it'll grow again 'm—never fear," replied Mrs. Sadler, with, for her, a wonderful cheeriness—"thicker and beautifuller than ever, I dare say!"

"It doesn't a bit matter," said I, in the same listless tone. "As well short as long."

Mrs. Sadler sighed then, and let the question drop. And presently, my toilette completed, as far as it went, the landlady proceeded, with a handful or two of early spring flowers which she

had purchased over the area-railings, to make the bedroom quite bright and fragrant. I lay still and watched her; following her movements with dreamy eyes.

“You are making me unusually smart to-day,” I said at last. “What is it for?”

“Oh, her ladyship will be here directly!” replied Mrs. Sadler, bustling about as she spoke; but without any of those irritating bumps and creakings which “bustling about” with most people ordinarily means.

“Her ladyship? And who, pray, is that?”

“Well, 'm, you used to call her Miss de Vere; but I'm told that she is Lady Tracy now—has married the son of a dook or something,” replied Mrs. Sadler, as she dusted the cheap gimcracks that decorated the narrow mantelpiece. There was a small fire in the tiny grate beneath it; a larger one was unnecessary to-day. It was almost “summery” out of doors, Mrs. Sadler said; notwithstanding the wind in the shade was just a trifle nipping.

“Ah, Lady Tracy—yes!” said I absently. “I suppose she is Lady Tracy by this time. She was engaged to the only son of the Earl of Starch.”

“Fancy that!” said Mrs. Sadler, with a sigh.

I was not in the least surprised to learn that Aurora was married. Before—before I was ill I had known that the wedding-day was near. Nor did it to me in the least degree sound extraordinary to hear my faithful friend spoken of as Viscountess Tracy. Nothing astonishes one, I think—nothing seems odd, remarkable, or out of the common course—in the lassitude and prostration which follow upon the heels of a long sickness. When the deadly enemy has been wrestled with and routed, the convalescent days not infrequently are marked by a languorous indifference to the world's affairs—an indifference the “sad serenity” of which it will sometimes take a good deal to ruffle or to dispel. At such a time one hears, perhaps, of the most astounding events, and receives the intelligence with an absent smile.

“Lady Tracy has been here constantly of late ; has she not ?” I inquired.

“Indeed, yes, Mrs. Darkwood—lots o’ times ! Only you haven’t known her like,” answered Mrs. Sadler. “To-day, ’owever, she’s coming earlier than common ; because she’s aware that you may sit up and talk with her. Ah, she’ve a warm and generous heart of her own, have that Lady Tracy ; and no more pride about her,”

added Mrs. Sadler, "'an if she was still Miss de Vere!"

"Mrs. Sadler," said I abruptly, after a pause.

"Yes, 'm—I'm not gone."

"You did not nurse me alone—all by yourself, without help, I mean; did you?"

"Me? Lor', no, 'm!"

"Who—who was here, then?"

"Well, 'm, of course I did all I could. But you see there was the house to look after, and my two boys, and the other lodgers, and—and so a Holy Sister—Sister Dorothea her name was—came from—"

"A Holy Sister! Do you mean a Sister of Mercy?"

"A sort of," replied Mrs. Sadler vaguely—"though it isn't to be expected that you'd have any recollection of her."

"No."

"She was a frightful object to look at, Mrs. Darkwood; but she was a real lady for all that."

"You mean her dress was frightful?"

"Yes, 'm. There, I declare the first time as I came in here and found her bending over you in her long black gown, and her chin and head bound round like—like a corpse's, as you may

say, it gave me quite a turn inside, and that's the truth. All the same, 'm, when you came to look at her well—close—you saw then that her face was very sweet and very calm ; and," said Mrs. Sadler earnestly, "it—it somehow made you think of heaven."

"I can understand."

"And she was as sweet and gentle as she looked too," said Mrs. Sadler ; "and always the same."

"I can believe it. And where is that good sister now ?" I asked. "Sister Dorothea, I think you called her ?"

"Oh, 'm, she's gone back to her convent ! She left as soon as ever you were well out of danger—she was wanted elsewhere, she said—and that was more than ten days ago," was the landlady's reply.

"What is the name of the convent ?" I inquired musingly.

"I am not quite sure," Mrs. Sadler answered ; "but I believe she called it the Convent of St. Cordelia. And I fancy it's somewhere out Bayswater way."

"The Convent of St. Cordelia," I murmured to myself. "I will remember that." Aloud I said : "Of course it was your own excellent idea,

Mrs. Sadler, to send for the good sister—to bring her hither to nurse me?”

“Mine? Oh, no, ’m!” said she promptly. “I’m a pore creature for ideas like. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Whose, then?” I inquired, in mild wonder.

“Mr. Eversleigh’s,” was the landlady’s unexpected reply.

Silence.

I lay back upon my heaped-up pillows, very still, very thoughtful; and with my eyes closed. I said no more—asked no more questions. In that silence, as Mrs. Sadler, duster in hand, moved noiselessly hither and thither, we heard the sound of the muffled knocker upon the street-door.

The landlady opened the folding-doors [and ran to the sitting-room window.

“Yes, ’m,” she said—“here’s her carriage. It’s the Viscountess! I’ll go and let her in.”





CHAPTER XXXI.

“**Y**ES,” Aurora was saying—it may have been twenty minutes or so later on—when Mrs. Sadler, in her best manner, had made us some nice strong tea, and had withdrawn to her area regions, “I daresay there are a great many things you want to know; but, now that we have amongst us managed to pull you so far on to the safe high-road to health, my dear Mrs. Darkwood, we are not—so don’t fancy it—going to let you slip back for the want of a little judicious severity. I consider myself mistress in this room—do you hear?—and moreover I mean to be obeyed in it. On my road to you I stopped at Doctor North’s; and he said that, nicely as you are getting along, you must yet be careful in more ways than one. Therefore it will do you no good to—”

“Dear Aurora, only to lie quietly here and to

look at you does me good, I believe," I murmured, interrupting her.

She nodded and smiled, and stroked a feeble hand of mine which lay upon the coverlet, her own shapely white one adorned with many a costly ring. She wore to-day a magnificent dolman of figured velvet heavily bordered with fur; a gown of richest and darkest green silk, much trimmed with satin of the same hue and lovely old lace; a large Rubens hat smothered in a mass of soft dull-green ostrich feathers; and a solitary band of plain and massive gold upon her left wrist. Her fine healthy complexion was as clear as ever; her bright fair hair was twisted up into its usual graceful knot; the smile of Aurora, Viscountess Tracy, was the same frank unaffected smile of the old Aurora Ramage. She looked beautiful.

Mrs. Sadler had wheeled my visitor's chair—a capacious, old-fashioned, chintz-clad and somewhat frowsy bit of furniture—conveniently close to the bed-head; and there Aurora sat, apparently in no hurry to go, chatting leisurely about all sorts of things, and with relish sipping her tea.

She had sent the carriage home, she observed, and should return by train to Arley Bridge; driving of course to Euston in a hansom.

"I shall never," said she merrily, "get over my old weakness for hansoms. The next present that Loftus gives me I will choose for myself, and it shall be a private hansom perfectly appointed; and I will drive about the Hertfordshire lanes in it all day long, and so make the Arley rustics gape and stare as they never gaped and stared in all their lives before."

"Is Arley Bridge then in Hertfordshire, Aurora?" I asked.

"Yes, my dear Mrs. Darkwood," replied she. "And to Arley Bridge I intend to—"

"Do not you think," I broke in earnestly, "it is about time that you put aside—dropped for ever—that stiff 'Mrs. Darkwood' you seem so fond of? Will not you sometimes try, Aurora, to call me 'Flower'? I wish you would!"

She laughed; blushed deeply; and said,—

"I should like to—if—if you are sure that it will not offend you to hear me."

"Offend me? Oh, Aurora!"

"Well, then, Flower," said she, beginning to stroke my hand again, "I intend, the very hour that you are strong enough to be moved from this dull house, to carry you off to Arley Bridge; and there you shall get some colour, my dear, into that sad white face of yours."

“ Ah, but—but I do not know about that ! ” mused I aloud.

“ But I do,” said my friend briskly. “ What on earth is there to prevent you ? ”

“ I—I have to think of—of the future, Aurora,” I whispered.

“ So has everybody. You can take your time over it and think it well out at Arley Bridge,” was her cheery reply.

I smiled sorrowfully and doubtingly. Certainly at present the question as to what shape or course my future life should take was one that I had neither the heart nor the strength to thoroughly grapple with. For a while, at any-rate, it was a riddle that must rest ; nevertheless, in these convalescent days, I was continually brooding upon a possible solution to it.

As the afternoon wore on Lady Tracy told me a great deal about herself and her new life at Arley Bridge ; and everything of course was new to me, who had for so long, as it were, been a captive in utter darkness.

The village of Arley, it appeared, was in Hertfordshire, as Lady Tracy had said ; and, although the place was not ten miles—indeed it was scarcely eight—out of London, the neighbourhood all about it was fresh and beautiful country,

with "real live rustics in the lanes and fields," as Aurora expressed it.

The chief house near to the village was Arley Bridge; why "Bridge," though, nobody could tell, for there was nothing of the kind to be anywhere seen at Arley; its little winding stream in the meadows, where the watercress grew so abundantly for the benefit of Covent Garden Market, being here and there spanned by ancient planks which were very rotten in places and not at all safe. Years ago, Arley Bridge, which was a pretty house, but not by any means a large one, Lady Tracy said, had belonged to Lord Tracy's godmother—a Miss Loftus. When the old lady died, she left it, with everything in it and just as it stood, to her godson who bore her surname; with another and much finer mansion in Somersetshire. This old Miss Loftus had been very rich.

"And so," said Aurora, in the course of her narrative, "we spent our honeymoon at Arley Bridge. It was my wish; and Loftus, good fellow, was perfectly agreeable."

"What, didn't you go abroad for it; or—or anywhere else?" said I wonderingly.

"No, we didn't," said Lady Tracy, laughing. "We are going for it—a real foreign honeymoon

—by-and-by. And then we mean to have a ‘high old time?’”

“But—but—”

“It was like this,” said she, more gravely. “I looked in here one day, just before Christmas, in order to ask you to promise to be present at our wedding—which, by-the-way, was a very quiet affair; for the old folk at Starch are still inexorable, and are likely to remain so—and imagine my surprise, my grief, when—when,” said Aurora, rather nervously—“when I found how—how matters were!”

After a short pause she went on—

“The house was in a pretty state of confusion; and nobody took a bit of notice of or said ‘Thank you’ for my Christmas hamper; and I had taken such pains, too, to make it one worth accepting! Well, here I discovered you, my dear Flower—it had all happened the night before, I was told—lying terribly ill—delirious, in fact—moaning and raving in the agony of brain-fever. However they had, it appeared, sent to the Convent of St. Cordelia for one of the nursing sisters; and I—I was most thankful to perceive, dear, that you were in good and safe hands.

“I also wanted to stop in the house,” said

Aurora, "so that I might assist Mrs. Sadler and Sister Dorothea ; but Loftus wouldn't hear of it. ' You'd only be in the way, Aurora—there's no room for everybody,' said he ; ' and I'll drive you over here from Chesterfield Avenue every day, if you like, to see how Mrs. Darkwood is getting along. Won't that do ? ' And so, as there was sense in what he proposed, I gave in ; and—and in the end it was arranged like that, don't you see ? " remarked Lady Tracy sketchily.

" I wanted then," she continued, as I remained silent—" I wanted at once then to put off the wedding until you had quite recovered. Doctor North thought so badly of—of the whole business ; he could not guess how long—how long it might be about. The idea of being married and going away and leaving you behind in London, perhaps at death's door, or something remarkably like it, was exceedingly distasteful to me. In short, I wasn't going to have it. But Loftus, poor boy, looked very glum over this notion ; and he said,—

" ' Oh, come, Aurora—that's foolish ! You promised to marry me in January, or at the beginning of February at the latest, and I can't have you backing out of the bargain now ; it isn't fair. ' "

“ ‘ Well,’ said I, ‘ if I do marry you, Loftus, at the beginning of February, we’ll spend the honeymoon within a reasonable distance of Bentham Street. Married or unmarried, for the present—I mean until things are brighter for my friend Mrs. Darkwood—I am going there to see her just as often as ever I can.’ ”

“ A happy thought struck his lordship.

“ ‘ So you shall, Aurora,’ cried he. ‘ Why, there’s Arley Bridge ! The place is barely an hour’s drive out of town ; and from Euston you can get down to it in twenty minutes—with a quick train in something less. We’ll content ourselves for a while at Arley Bridge. How will that do ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Capittally,’ said I. And so, Flower, that was how we managed it. Loftus drives or rides into town to his club or elsewhere whenever he feels inclined ; and I, in like manner, am equally free and able to follow my own inclinations. As soon as you are well enough to travel, you are, my dear, as I have said, coming into the country on a long visit to us ; and you will then see for yourself what ‘ a convenient little box ’—as Loftus calls it—in every way is Arley Bridge.”

“ My true, true friend ! ” I murmured. I could

say no more. For, when one is sincerely and deeply grateful for real human sympathy and real human kindness, one's gratitude is difficult to put into speech. A dumb gratitude—a dumb thankfulness—is often the more eloquent, though it may not appear so.

At length Lady Tracy said she must go. It would never do if she were late for dinner. Lord Tracy was at home by himself that day, and would be safe, remarked Aurora, to be impatiently waiting for her at their small wooden station at Arley. She had told the footman to inform his master that she—the Viscountess—would return from town by train.

Still, now that I was pronounced to be “out of danger,” and had Doctor North's full permission to talk “in moderation and without excitement,” I resolved that Aurora should not quit my bedside until she had further enlightened me with regard to—with regard to what was past.

As she was bidding me an affectionate good-bye, and heartily assuring me that I should see her again on the morrow, I put my arms suddenly around her neck and whispered,—

“Aurora, where is—where is Daryl?”

“My dear, I cannot tell you.”

“Do not you really know?”

"I would tell you this moment if I did."

"Does—does any one know?"

"Yes; I believe that your best friend knows."

"You are my—my best friend, Aurora."

"No, I am not," she replied calmly.

To this assertion I made no rejoinder; but trembled slightly as I clung to Lady Tracy, with my face hidden upon her bosom.

"Mr. Eversleigh is your best friend—the best friend woman ever had," said Aurora, in the same even tone. "You'll have to acknowledge it some day."

"No, no, no," I shivered; "he is nothing to me!"

"There are few men living like him," said Aurora boldly. "Remember that."

I was still very weak; a trifle was sufficient to unnerve me; I burst into a fit of helpless weeping.

"I solemnly declare," said Aurora, "that if you do not this instant stop those tears I will not listen to another word—I mean it—nor will I remain here another moment; but straightway I shall march out into the street and drive to the station as hard as I can go."

I feared that she was in earnest; that she would carry out her threat; so, making haste to dry my eyes, I said brokenly,—

“Don’t go! See—there, I am calm. I will not cry, Aurora—I am quiet again; indeed I am! But tell—tell me—have pity on me—what you have done with—where they have put my darling—my little Isla? Oh, my child, my child!”

Aurora held me close to her breast.

“We buried her,” she answered very gently, “in Arley churchyard—a sweet shady old churchyard it is, as you will by-and-by see, dear Flower—and that is one reason why we want you to come to us.”

“How good of you—how good of you!” I sobbed.

“Dear, it was Mr. Eversleigh’s doing; not mine,” said Aurora. “I told him that I somehow felt certain you would not like your darling to be lost in a crowded London cemetery—”

“Ah, no,” I put in, with a tremor—“not that!”

“And he—Mr. Eversleigh—said immediately,” went on Aurora quietly—“having of course heard from Loftus about our Arley Bridge arrangements—‘Cannot we bury her, then, poor little soul, in Arley churchyard? Mrs. Darkwood would not mind that. You

are her friend ; and she would like her child—since she is not able to decide anything for herself—to be near you, I fancy.’

“ ‘When she recovers—if Heaven be merciful—she should bless you for the good thought,’ said I earnestly. ‘It shall be done.’ And it was.”

“And I do bless you, Aurora,” I said.

“Honour to whom honour is due !” said Lady Tracy obstinately. “You must bless and thank Mr. Eversleigh by-and-by. That, Flower, is your duty. We saw a good deal of him,” she added, “whilst you were lying so ill ; indeed met him very frequently ; and my husband and he became quite chummy. More than once, in fact, he has dined with us and stayed for the night at Arley Bridge. Loftus likes him immensely, now that he knows more of him ; and so do I,” announced Aurora stoutly.

I could find no reply to this ; so kept dumb ; my face still hidden from the fast-fading light.

“I thank Heaven,” I cried presently, with a shudder that was irrepressible, “that I did not—that I did not really do so fearful a thing—that dreadful deed ! Oh, Aurora, if—if I had actually murdered him—Daryl—my own hus-

band! On that night I must have been mad—mad—”

“What, do you remember all that?” she whispered soothingly. “But, dear, it is past; do not let it hurt or trouble you now. You could not help it, Flower—it was part of your illness; we all understand that—doctors and everybody.”

“I must have been mad!” I moaned again.

“You were, dear,” said Aurora gravely. “Forget it.”

“With every day,” I said hoarsely, “it all comes back to me by degrees—more clearly, more hideously; and—and— Oh, Aurora!”

“Forget it, Flower,” she said again, “as you would forget an ugly dream.”

“I cannot. There are some things one never can forget. Nevertheless, with all my heart and soul, I do thank Heaven that I was hindered in that wicked deed—”

Figuratively speaking, Aurora pulled me up short.

“And do you likewise recollect, Flower,” she said quickly, yet with a kind of tender daring and gentle reproof in her caressing manner and in her grave low voice, “that it was Mr. Eversleigh who most assuredly—look at it how you

will—was the instrument of Heaven in hindering——”

With a petulant sob I broke from her ; sank back upon my pillows ; and turned my face away from her.

“You are determined, it seems, Aurora,” I said, “that I shall not at any rate forget my infinite obligations to—to Mr. Eversleigh ! He is fortunate in having so staunch a champion !”

She laughed softly and good-temperedly ; gave me a lingering kiss which I did not return ; and, when I looked around me, she was gone. But I heard her call out in the next room, when the folding-doors were shut—“You will see me, Flower, to-morrow. Be brave, dear ; cheer up !”

.

On that bright late March day when I said adieu to Bentham Street I left Mrs. Sadler’s house alike poor in health and in pocket. My illness altogether had been a grievously expensive one ; my careful hoard, earned at Mr. Binkworthy’s theatre of varieties, had by this time sadly dwindled. Still I was able to pay every farthing I owed ; to make Mrs. Sadler a handsome present ; to send another to the Convent of St. Cordelia—which holy retreat, I learned, was entirely supported by voluntary

contributions—and, ah me, then to think of the future with what courage I could!

I was in my front room—mine thenceforward no longer—dressed in my new mourning, and waiting for Lady Tracy and the carriage. My trunks were already piled in the gloomy passage; and Mrs. Sadler sat amongst them, crying dismally because I was going away.

“Do not cry, Mrs. Sadler,” I said hopefully. “I will come and see you whenever I can; and I shall not forget you—believe me.”

“It’s a cruel world,” wept the poor widow—“all ups and downs and nothing certain. Here to-day and gone to-morrow—heigh-ho!”

“Mrs. Sadler,” I said suddenly; recalling with a pang of unutterable sorrow the tender-heartedness and shy sympathy of the shadowy old man who had been so good to my lost darling; “where is old Mr. Jones? I—I should like to see him once more; to—to say good-bye to him before I go. Is he upstairs?”

“Why, bless the pore dear lady,” cried Mrs. Sadler forlornly, “he left me long ago! He went away, ’m, almost directly you was taken ill. But he paid everythink; there’s nothin’ owing—pore lone old gent; and I’ve never set eyes on him since!”

“Strange!” murmured I.

“Yes; he always was a cur’ous old soul,” said Mrs. Sadler, dolefully shaking her head; “and now I’m losing you, ’m. Oh, dear, oh, dear, it do seem hard!”

Before I could in any wise try to comfort her we heard the near rolling of carriage-wheels and the brisk clatter of horses’ hoofs. A splendid equipage had driven into Bentham Street; and a footman was knocking at Mrs. Sadler’s front-door.

“It’s the Viscountess,” wept the landlady.

Yes; Aurora had arrived at the appointed hour, to carry me off to Arley Bridge.





CHAPTER XXXII.

“**N**OW, mind,” had said Lady Tracy ;
“you are here, dear Flower, at
Arley Bridge, to be idle all day
long ; to be out of doors as much as possible ;
sitting, say, occasionally under those nice old
trees yonder, when the leaves get a little thicker
and the sun grows a little warmer ; to trouble
your head about nothing whatever ; in short, to
take life, don’t you know, just as smoothly and
as drowsily as did those odd lazy folk in that
wonderful land where it ‘seemed always after-
noon’ !”

I shook my head, smiling mournfully. Already
had I formed dim plans with regard to my life in
the future. With more earnest thought, with
more prayer for high guidance in the matter, I
should, I fancied, ere long see my path more
clearly to the right course ahead of me.

In spite of the deep melancholy which at times possessed me—a melancholy that assuredly was not to be marvelled at ; all that I had suffered, all that I had gone through being borne in mind—I could not help feeling that life at Arley Bridge was a very pleasant and wholesome business.

The house was by no means small, I found ; nor was it too large. It was a commodious and decidedly old-fashioned abode in which, from the moment of crossing its threshold and entering the roomy old hall, a stranger might look around him and somehow at once feel at home. Built of white stone which, with time and storm, had taken a grayish, greenish hue, it stood surrounded by about five-and-forty acres of lovely park-land, well back from the broad high-road ; so that only the chimneys and upper windows of Arley Bridge were here and there through the trees visible to passers-by. A private path across these grounds—narrow, winding, and copse-shadowed—led one to a lonely wicket in the low flint wall of Arley churchyard.

Lord Tracy himself was as genuinely kind to me, as solicitous for my comfort beneath his roof, as was his handsome wife ; it seemed to me that his marriage with Aurora had vastly improved the young man.

Her bright sensible companionship ; her shrewd practical character, and her active, cheerful example in everyday affairs and duties ; had bestirred, as it were, to a like activity the better and higher qualities that had hitherto lain dormant in the man. Certainly he was no longer the selfish, affected fop ; the idle, the almost effeminate dandy I had mentally designated the lover of Miss de Vere on my first introduction to him at Thangate. He had become more natural, more manly, more healthily energetic ; and consequently he was more pleasant and companionable in every sense. He had always been proud of Aurora ; and now, I verily believe, she was growing proud of him.

Every day, when the weather was warm and fine, I went with Aurora for a long and delightful drive—Lord Tracy sometimes asking whether he might accompany us—and so explored the charming country neighbourhood in the midst of which Arley Bridge was situated.

The April showers were nourishing the fresh young grass and awakening to vigorous life the moist bursting leaves ; the lush and radiant green of the meadows, the tender foliage of the trees, the fair fickle blue of the sky, with its fleecy swift-sailing cloudlets and the frolicsome

wind from the south that drove them along—all these things were most beautiful and in a high degree soothing to the jaded spirit of a melancholy invalid.

Nevertheless I was well aware that with each too-quickly passing day I was growing stronger, undeniably stronger—how else indeed could it be, surrounded as I was by every luxury and by every care?—and with better health of course came better heart.

Sooner or later however—I never lost sight of this fact—my sojourn at Arley Bridge must come to an end. And then, after that, there was my future. Well, so I told myself, I should be ready!

“I have ordered the carriage this morning,” announced Aurora one day after breakfast—a bright breezy day without a cloud in the sky; a day on which the larks sang madly out of sight and the tree-tops bent and whispered together of the glory of the coming summer—“to take us to Ealing Common. Loftus has an engagement in town, and won’t be home until dinner-time; and so we ourselves need be in no hurry to get back to Arley. If you don’t mind, dear Flower, we are going to call on my mother; she will be so pleased to see you again. She knows that

you are stopping with us at Arley Bridge ; and she will feel hurt and slighted perhaps if I do not take you to see her."

"What!" I cried involuntarily, "has Mrs. Ramage, then, left Shepherd's Bush—left Chesterfield Avenue?"

"Two months ago. I thought I had mentioned it," replied Lady Tracy. "Dear old mother—bless her!—she's in clover now; thanks to my own good generous boy."

I was truly glad of this opportunity of once more meeting Mrs. Ramage ; for I had been haunted by the fear that Daryl—Heaven knew where he now was ; I did not ; and neither Aurora nor her husband, it really appeared, could enlighten me !—had in all likelihood taken leave of Chesterfield Avenue, characteristically forgetting to settle his debts. I could not endure the thought of this injustice to Mrs. Ramage ; and was most anxious, if it were in my power to do so, to put matters straight in that direction at least.

Mrs. Ramage's suburban villa was merely a good hour's drive from Arley Bridge—at all events, it was only an hour's drive in Lady Tracy's luxurious barouche, with its marvellously easy springs and splendid thorough-bred pair ;

and, bowling delightfully along the Hertfordshire roads that would by-and-by take us into the adjoining county of Middlesex, I told Aurora of the fear which troubled me.

“Good gracious!” exclaimed she, smiling—“pray do not mention the matter to my mother. You will be sure to offend her—or rather to wound her feelings—if you do. She is ‘quite the lady’ now, she says, and means to forget all about those days when she let apartments in the Chesterfield Avenue. Besides, Flower, even supposing it to be as you apprehend, why, it doesn’t signify a rap to my mother. She is more than comfortably off in her new home, as you will see.”

Lady Tracy chatted on briskly; presently observing that her mother’s house was called “The Oaks;” though at present, in the way of trees, there was naught to be seen in the front garden of the villa; neat clusters of severe-looking shrubs however bordered the carriage-drive.

There was also a half-moon patch of lawn in front, perfectly kept, and with a new yellow iron garden-seat upon it.

Mrs. Ramage, dressed in a purple shot-silk gown and a cap with salmon-coloured ribbons flying in it—an immense brooch and a great

many other ornaments as well—received us in her own impulsive fashion. She seized my hand within both her own, and for some time shook it and hugged it silently, unable to say a word. But the queer duckings and wriggings that I remembered so well were in their way very eloquent; and speech, after all, was hardly necessary.

We sent the carriage into the town for an hour or so; and stayed to luncheon; and listened to Mrs. Ramage's description of her new and easy life, and to her reiterated praises of "that noble-hearted young man," her son-in-law, Lord Tracy—the tears rising to the good soul's eyes whenever she mentioned the Viscount's generosity.

But, warned doubtless beforehand by Aurora, Mrs. Ramage contrived to avoid all allusion either to my late illness, my vanished husband, or to my cruel loss; though more than once she had stammered; checked a sentence; coughed awkwardly; and I felt as certain as if she had spoken outright that she had been upon the brink of inquiring after "the dear Captain."

Very reluctantly she let us go; earnestly asking us when we were coming again.

"When," promptly answered Lady Tracy,

with her farewell embrace—"when you have been to Arley Bridge, mother. You are always coming, and you never come."

Mrs. Ramage wriggled; and protested that her son-in-law's house was too fine a place for her, and she was very happy where she was. Perhaps some day, some future day, hinted Aurora's mother, when she—Mrs. Ramage herself—had become more accustomed to her own good fortune, and could think of her clever daughter's exalted position without that delicious tremor of excitement which seemed to take away her breath and to make her head spin round, she would come and spend at Arley Bridge a few quiet days with Lord Tracy and his wife—or, let her say, wherever they might be living at that dim future time. At present, pleaded Mrs. Ramage, with her most eloquent wriggle, she could promise no more—indeed she could not—Aurora must not ask it of her.

Driving leisurely homeward, Lady Tracy exclaimed abruptly,—

"Oh, by-the-way, Flower, did I tell you, my dear, that I met old Binkworthy in Oxford Street yesterday afternoon?"

"No," said I, with a slight start and a little

quiver of the breath ; “ you certainly did not tell me.”

Somehow or other, in these calm, lazy, convalescent days at Arley Bridge, no thought of Mr. Binkworthy had arisen, spectre-like, to disturb their sweet tranquillity. He had passed of late clean out of my mind.

“ Did — did he say anything about me, Aurora ? ” I asked with palpable anxiety in the next breath.

“ Yes. But do not be frightened,” replied she. “ I don’t fancy he’ll trouble you any more. He has got hold of a fresh star—this time from Australia—who, he says, is drawing tremendous audiences. She calls herself Signora Something or other ; and the Levity is crammed nightly, according to Mr. Binkworthy.”

I drew a sigh of relief.

“ What did he say about me ? ” I inquired.

“ He merely remarked that he hoped you were all right again, or something of that sort ; but the whole manner of the man, my dear Flower,” said Aurora, frowning, “ was offensive in the extreme, to say the least of it. The carriage was standing outside Grant and Lavender’s—I had stopped there for some more of that lovely *écru* lace I showed you the other day—and

Binkworthy, as he talked, with both arms leant heavily over the side of it, and called me 'Countess' in the most objectionable style. 'I am not going to tolerate this,' thought I, 'with Banks stuck there upon the pavement not a yard away from him. I'll cut his familiarity short.' He said something else ; winding up the observation with another odious 'Eh, Countess ?' that made my blood tingle. I looked stonily over his hat ; called sharply to the footman—'Home directly, please tell Willis ;' and the next minute Mr. Binkworthy was reeling backward from the carriage-step, and flinging, I have no doubt, a vigorous malediction after my vanishing chariot-wheels !"

Aurora chuckled at the recollection of the manager's discomfiture ; reminding me that, even in her "old Levity days," she had always succeeded, in any hostile business with him, in getting the upper hand of Mr. Binkworthy.

It was close upon the stroke of five when the tall elms of Arley village, with the rooks flapping and cawing restlessly around their clumsy nests of black sticks and twigs, loomed in sight through the thin blue distant haze. Already were the high hedges beginning to wax fragrant and sweet subtle grassy smells to float upon the still

air. A pigeon was cooing in a thick plantation near to the roadside; the sun was westering and growing languid above the copses of Arley Bridge.

"I have been thinking," said Aurora, gently breaking a silence that had fallen upon us—"indeed, to speak openly, Loftus and I, only last night, were together discussing the matter; and he said what a splendid idea of mine it was—I say, dear Flower, I have been thinking what a pleasant arrangement it would be—for me, at any rate—if you would consent to stay with me always. I love you very dearly," said she, with an unaffected and earnest simplicity that touched me keenly, "and that you know without my saying so; and, if you would but agree to remain with me as my lifelong companion, it would give me unspeakable happiness—"

I laid my hand upon hers, and stopped her.

"Dear, generous friend," I said, in a low voice, "it cannot be. It is impossible!"

"Impossible, Flower?" she echoed cheerily.

"Oh, no; don't say that!"

"You have your husband, Aurora," I said mournfully; "you will soon have troops of friends—little ones perhaps by-and-by; you will not always want me—"

“Troops of friends?” she echoed again, now with a short light laugh which had however no particle of bitterness in it. “I don’t know where they are coming from! Why, bless you, Flower, not a soul in the neighbourhood worth naming has yet come to see me—and probably nobody worth naming ever will! Of course Loftus’s friends are in a manner mine; still—still there are others, don’t you know? Every society journal in London, you see, came out with something disagreeable—something would-be humorous and sarcastic—when Loftus married me; the profession of the woman whom Lord Tracy had fallen in love with was an open secret from the first. Loftus says, in his vague good-natured way, ‘Never you mind, Aurora, old girl—they’ll all come round in time;’ and I tell him frankly that, for aught I care, they may ‘all’—whoever they be or represent—please themselves; I do not care a button. I speak for myself. I should be sorry indeed, though, if Loftus got to care—that is all. I should hate to see him fret about it. But that’s not the point in question,” said Lady Tracy, more briskly. “I am sure, Flower, that you will not pain me by refusing to grant a favour which I ask of you from the bottom of my heart?”

Here, I thought, was precisely the moment to let her hear the determination I had arrived at. So I spoke.

“Aurora,” I said sadly, “it’s of no use—I cannot do it! My mind is made up. Grateful as I feel to you, and ever shall so long as I live, what you wish is impossible. You would suggest perhaps in favour of your loving scheme that I—I—that I have now no child, no home, no husband. True. All the same, the last-named may at any hour reappear and compel me, or strive to compel me, to again live with him. And that, Aurora, I could not endure. I could not—I could not; after—after all that has happened through Daryl’s conduct! I—I could not bear such torment and live! No, dearest friend; I want to hide myself from him and from the world—to hide myself in some retreat where Daryl would never dream of looking for me; where it would be possible to forget the hollowness of the world and—and to prepare myself for heaven. Life has no charm for me now. And so, dear Aurora—believe me, this is no hasty decision on my part; it is the serious outcome of much meditation and prayer—I have resolved to go to the Convent of St. Cordelia; to tell the

good sisters my life-history; and ask them to take me in there—in their midst to give me shelter from the——”

Whilst I had been speaking, Aurora's foot, I noticed, kept tapping the carriage-mat. At last it seemed that she could no longer restrain her vexation and impatience; for she burst out with—

“Upon my word, Flower, this is too foolish—I was positively going to say idiotic—of you! What on earth shall I hear next, I wonder? I shall send for Doctor North; you can't be so well as we have thought; you must be slipping back, or you never would talk in this gloomy, morbid, ridiculous strain; for it is too ridiculous! You are not joking; are you?” she broke off brusquely.

I smiled sorrowfully; but did not turn my head to meet her bright indignant eyes.

“You well know, Aurora, that it is not like me to jest upon such a subject; it is a very solemn matter if you will only reflect a moment. I am in earnest,” I answered quietly.

“And are you, pray, aware,” she went on almost angrily, ignoring my reply, “that the nursing sisters of the Convent of St. Cordelia are all of them gentlewomen with means, more

or less, of their own—the Sister Dorothea who came to you in Bentham Street is a very rich woman; a woman of title; I believe Mr. Eversleigh knew her before she joined the sisterhood—and that it is from a pure love of good and Christian work that they go about nursing whithersoever duty calls them; that they do not turn from the worst of slums nor shrink in their ministering from the most loathsome of diseases? Their world, in fact, is the sick-room. Death to them is more familiar than life.”

“I know all that, dear,” I gently interpolated.

“But,” said Aurora grimly, “there are others in that Sisterhood of St. Cordelia—if I am speaking too bluntly, you must forgive me, Flower—the poorer sisters who have been permitted to join the community, but who are yet without private means of any kind. These, I have heard, are expected to do the work—the menial work—of the place; and I have also heard that they never put their noses outside the convent gates from the end of one year to that of another. This perhaps you do not know?”

“Yes, Aurora; I know that too,” I said resignedly; “and it is one of those poor hard-working sisters who are never seen beyond the convent walls that I mean—I should say, that

I long to be ; always supposing they will consent to have me amongst them. Poor as I am, I could expect nothing higher ; and such complete seclusion will suit me exactly. Daryl never will find me there."

With a movement of strong irritation Lady Tracy lowered her lace sunshade ; and with a snap shut it.

"Their dress is something too frightful !" she fumed. "It is hideous enough to frighten the crows. What you will look like in it I altogether fail to conceive. It's too much for my imagination. Oh, Flower," cried she, "I am so disappointed in you ! I never, never could have believed that you would take such a wild crotchet into your head ! It is too wild—too absurd ! We might have been so happy all our lives together if you would only have had the sense to see it !"

She was still doing her utmost to shake my resolve, bringing many a blunt and vigorous argument to bear upon the vexed question, when we drove into the grounds of Arley Bridge. Having alighted from the carriage and entered the hall, Lady Tracy inquired of the servant who had opened the door whether his lordship had returned from town.

“No, my lady; he has not,” the young man replied.

“Has any one called in my absence?” asked Aurora then.

“Yes, my lady—a gentleman,” answered the man, who, I fancy, at that date had been only a few days in Lord Tracy’s service. “He arrived about an hour ago; but, hearing that neither you, my lady, nor his lordship was at home, he said he would wait until you came in. I showed him, at his request, into the library, and gave him the daily papers.”

“What is his name?” inquired the Viscountess quickly; pausing as she moved across the hall to glance over her shoulder at the man-servant.

And to me, at any rate, his answer came like a thunderbolt.

“Mr. Eversleigh, my lady,” said he.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

LEIGH EVERSLEIGH at Arley Bridge !
The Viscountess, herself not in the least astonished at the servant's answer, turned and put another question to the young man ; but I do not know what it was. I stayed to hear no more ; without once looking round, I walked straight up to my two pleasant rooms, locked the bedroom door, and flung myself down upon my dressing-room sofa.

Manya confused and painful thought was hurrying through my brain ; the unlooked-for arrival of Mr. Eversleigh somehow sorely troubled me. The news of his presence in the house had filled me with a curious sense of unrest, of dismay, of vague unsettledness ; and, as I lay prone there amongst the silken sofa-cushions, I was suddenly possessed of a longing to escape from the peace and quiet of Arley Bridge. Yet whither, at a moment's notice, should I flee ? However, common

sense soon came to my aid ; and I smothered down the small voice that was whispering within me and inciting me to so foolish a course.

How long I had been lying motionless upon the couch in my dressing-room I had not the faintest idea ; but daylight, I could see, was fading, and a soft sapphire twilight was coming on.

Hark ! Yes—the shrill little clock upon my bedroom mantelpiece was striking seven ; and there was some one tapping at and rattling the handle of the farther door.

“ It is only I,” called out Aurora. “ May I not come in ? ”

To myself I supposed wearily that there was no help for it ; and with a stifled sigh I arose to admit the brisk Viscountess.

Full of animation she came in ; and I perceived directly that she had put on her dinner-gown ; a lovely pale peach-coloured satin with festoons of gossamer-like lace falling from throat to hem, and a close-encircling necklace of twisted seed-pearls for her sole ornament.

“ Gracious, Flower—what, all in the dark, or nearly so ? ” she cried. “ You really must hurry along, my dear ; we dine a little earlier than common this evening ; for Loftus has got back from town, and has got back too as hungry as

the proverbial hunter. Come," observed Aurora ; "let us shed a little light upon the scene ; you cannot see to dress in the dark, Flower."

Speaking, she moved swiftly to and fro and lighted the candles in both rooms.

"There," said she—"now look alive, my dear!"

I meanwhile had returned to the sofa.

"My head aches badly, Aurora," I, said in a pleading tone. "Please don't ask me to join you at dinner. I—I cannot come down this evening."

She looked at me quickly, and not without vexation. I believe she knew that I was not uttering the strict truth.

"This is tiresome, Flower," she said ; "for Mr. Eversleigh dines and sleeps to-night at Arley Bridge——"

"What !" I involuntarily interrupted, but in a faint enough voice—"you have—have invited him to—to stay?"

"Certainly I have," replied Aurora. "Why, pray, not ? In reality, he simply called—called indeed to see how you were progressing, to ascertain what strides you had made upon the high-road to health, and so forth ; and you have made strides, you know, my dear friend, though you are rather reluctant to admit it ! Hitherto, whenever Mr. Eversleigh has dined here, he has

remained with us for the night ; and on this occasion also he has consented to be our guest until the morning."

" Well, I can't see him yet," I said querulously.

" I suppose—nay, I hope—that you will, though, be well enough to come down by-and-by ? A cup of tea may cure the headache," said Aurora gravely.

" If you do not mind I should like the tea now, Aurora," I meekly suggested.

" Of course ; but you must have some dinner too. I shall send Emilia up with it," answered Lady Tracy promptly.

" Oh, Aurora," I rejoined petulantly, " do not you comprehend, or will not you ? My head is bad—really bad. How can one eat dinner with a bad headache ? "

" One can't, I know, with some headaches," said the Viscountess drily. " I didn't understand, Flower, that yours was of that inconvenient kind."

" Well, it is ; and tea is all that I want—so please send up nothing besides," I told her wearily.

My friend was shrewd—perhaps occasionally too shrewd—and it was difficult at any time to deceive her. She laughed pleasantly as she turned to go, saying,—

“Oh, very well! Nevertheless it won't do to have you shutting yourself up here to starve. Recollect that you are an invalid, and want feeding up and looking after.”

With that she went; and I fancied I was left in peace. But the next moment Aurora again popped her fair head into the room, to say, “Be sure you come down presently if you can. Perhaps when the men have got rid of me I may run up and fetch you.” She smiled; nodded brightly; and then she really did go.

Aurora's visit had thoroughly dispelled my physical languor. I could no longer lie passive, nursing my sombre thoughts. Emilia, too, the Viscountess's own maid, had appeared with the tea. It was very strong; and it had refreshed, cleared my brain, and had bestirred it to increased activity.

I rose, laved my hot forehead and hands in some toilet-vinegar and water, and began to pace restlessly from one room to the other. The house seemed unusually quiet; they must by this time, I thought, be shut in the dining-room.

Sighing, I went to one of the windows and looked out. The dusk had deepened to an amethyst gloom; the sward of the park was silvered lightly with dew; the spring moon, pale

as a primrose, was rising above the black plantation which hid from my gaze the village church of Arley.

To-day I had had no opportunity of going to the churchyard ; and seldom, since I had been living in Lord Tracy's house, had a day gone by without my visiting—alone, but carrying with me beautiful flowers from the Arley Bridge conservatory—the little grave of my lost Isla.

It was late, true ; but I could very well go thither at this hour. I should be missed by no one ; and could easily get back to the house before Lady Tracy quitted the dining-room.

In my wardrobe there was a black-silk cloak lined with minever, hood and all. It wrapped me snugly from head to foot ; and I had often worn it of a night on my omnibus journeys in London, when jolting from Mrs. Sadler's lodgings down to Mr. Binkworthy's theatre of varieties.

I put on now this warm silk cloak, noiselessly left my room, and crept downstairs to a garden door at the end of the library passage.

The lighted windows of the dining-room did not look in this direction ; all the same, I hurried nervously through the misty grounds, as if vigilant eyes were in the rear of me and my movements were being observed.

Once or twice I fancied that I was followed by

some one, that footsteps brushed the grass behind me ; but, when I glanced half-fearfully around me, there was nothing anywhere visible save the trees, their shadows, and the moonlight which gave such fantastic shape to them. Overhead the clear white stars were thickening ; a breath of wind travelled mournfully through the dark plantation boughs.

It did not take me many minutes, by this narrow winding path across the park, to reach the lonely wicket in the churchyard wall ; moreover, by this time it had become familiar ground to me, and familiar ground is quickly traversed.

Arley Church itself was a low gray building, with a short square tower three-parts clad with ivy. It was very sheltered ; very silent ; all around it, closely packed, lay the happy dead. Here and there a mausoleum or a costly tombstone stood out conspicuously from amidst its lowlier neighbours ; but the many graves were for the most part unmarked by cross or headstone ; the few humble devices in wood, scattered widely apart, were all aslant and neglected and green with decay.

In a remote corner, the least crowded of any, where ivy topped the low flint wall of the churchyard, as well as the tower of the church ; where

a spreading yew cast its cool and solemn shadow, and the periwinkles clustered and trailed in profusion over a hillock of big gray mossy stones flung there and forgotten, perhaps, in years gone by; where, in the springtime, violets both purple and white might be found in hiding amongst the moss, and daffodils lifted their heavy yellow heads to nod them bell-like in the wet west wind—here, at rest, in this sweet and shady spot, lay Isla, my child, my darling who was not really lost to me, but only “gone before;” in all the wide world the solitary human tie that once had rendered life truly dear to me! Marking the place where the kind earth covered her, where the shorn turf grew greenly over the little mound, stood a slender marble cross; pure, chaste, cold, white as unsullied snow. Upon it, in letters of gold, were engraven her simple name; her brief span of life; and, beneath her dear name, those bright words of the Good Shepherd which are as balm to the heart of every grieving mother not yet grown old in motherhood,—

“ *In loving memory of Isla Darkwood; aged five years. ‘Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God.’* ”

Time, merciful as it ever is, had softened the first sharp agony of my loss ; and I could now kneel in silence and without tears by the grave—by the earthly resting-place—of my little angel. My faith, thank God, was strong ; and I knew that an hour must come—it might be near ; it might be far off ; but sooner or later that hour would surely come—when Isla and I should meet again ; meet again, never more to be parted from each other ! “Be patient,” I would whisper to myself in those melancholy days —“be patient—have courage ; and the child as you knew her and loved her in life will be yours once more ! Unless,” used I to think very sorrowfully sometimes—“it be that we grow old in heaven !”

The night was warm, notwithstanding the low-lying mist and the fallen dew ; an early bat, or some other grim winged creature of the darkness, swept by the churchyard wall. Plaintively across the dim fields from a distant farm-shed came the lowing of cattle ; the faint “tinkle-tinkle” of a sheep-bell ; weirdly peeped the primrose moon through the black and ivied belfry bars.

The flowers which I had yesterday brought hither were not yet withered ; in the moonlit gloom, with the dew upon them, they were faintly

fragrant still. Close-wrapped in my long cloak, with the hood of it drawn over my cropped hair, which I used pensively to fancy would never grow again, I sank upon my knees by the slender marble cross and wound my arms desolately about it. Chill as death's touch itself it struck to my brow; ice-cold as the dawn-wind of a winter morn.

And yet, as I knelt there, a great peace, a sense of infinite calm and gratitude, seemed to steal over my heart—nay, to fill my whole being; and prayer was in that sad heart of mine, if not upon my lips. Perhaps, after all—who shall tell?—I was thankful that Isla was indeed at rest; utterly beyond the reach of all earthly suffering; that life's bitter sorrows and manifold disappointments could never touch her now, never touch her more!

Ah, would that I too were there, and at peace, beyond the eternal stars, in heaven with my darling—that my future were as safe as hers!

Whatever befalls in the coarse loud world,

We know she will never wake.

When I thought of the sorrow she might have known,

I was almost glad for her sake. . .

Tears might have tired those kiss-closed eyes,

Grief hardened the mouth I kissed;

I was almost glad that my dear was dead

Because of the pain she had missed.

Oh, if I could but have died a child
With a white child-soul like hers,
As pure as the wind-flowers down in the copse,
Where the soul of the spring's self stirs ;
Or if I had only done with it all,
And might lie by her side unmoved !
I envied the very clods of earth
Their place near the child I loved !

Our spirits—my child's and my own—in such an hour as this were always very near together ; although I was still a pilgrim upon earth and she was “at home with God.”

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A hand, with infinite gentleness, touched my bowed head lingeringly ; and, in momentary dumb terror, I started to my feet.

There in the moonlight, by the little new grave, stood Leigh Eversleigh.

“Lady Tracy told me that I should find you here,” he said, just as kindly and as quietly as if we had parted only on the day before. “It is late, Mrs. Darkwood ; the grass hereabout is very long and damp, you know. Will not you come home ? ”

And so it was—by Isla's white cross in Arley churchyard—that I and Leigh Eversleigh met again.





CHAPTER XXXIV.

IT was several minutes ere I could recover my lost self-command.

Had it been broad day, instead of the time it chanced to be, Mr. Eversleigh must have perceived into what a state of embarrassment and agitation his sudden appearance there in Arley churchyard had thrown me.

But perhaps the uncomfortable fact was not unmarked by him ; I cannot say. I felt strangely glad to see him again ; and yet strangely miserable ; no soul save myself could divine how I had dreaded this encounter with Leigh.

One thing however was evident—he was striving his utmost, with conventional and common-place inquiries as to my health and its present amendment, to render the meeting smooth and easy for both of us. The embarrassment, the constraint on my part, went far

towards making his task a by no means considerable one. Finding him thus unexpectedly by the grave of my child had sorely perturbed me.

I did not offer him my hand—I could not—I hardly knew why.

Remembering all that Daryl had told me on that terrible night at Thangate—the confession, the cruel and unmanly confession, was verily scorched into my memory—was it right that I should greet him, Leigh Eversleigh, even as a friend? And yet how good, how kind, how nobly generous he had been—had ever been to me! What was right? What ought I to do? Which was the right course for me to adopt; for me, Daryl Darkwood's wife?

In silence, with a full and an aching heart, I turned from the little grave; Mr. Eversleigh in silence following me. By the lonely wicket in the low flint wall I halted, glanced at him timidly, hesitated; then said, in a voice tremulous beyond my control,—

“I should like to thank you, if I could, for all that you have done for me; it has been so much—so much! Ah, believe me, I know it; but—but to-night I am afraid that I cannot. You must wait; you have taken me unawares; I—I am not yet so strong as I was; I—I——”

I could not continue ; I broke down utterly in my incoherent essay. I wrung my hands beneath my cloak ; shivering in the soft and ghostly light of that quiet place.

“Try to realise, Mrs. Darkwood,” he was saying calmly enough himself, “that there is indeed no occasion to thank me. Aught that I have found it within my power to do, any true friend, any friend worthy the name, would readily have—”

“Yes, the truest of friends—that in truth you have been ; I own it now !” I interrupted a little wildly ; and checked myself again.

“Please say no more,” Leigh entreated—“it is so entirely unnecessary. Do you know, I came to Arley Bridge to-day with the express purpose of seeing you—you alone, before any one ; because I—I have a suggestion to put before you that touches your future, Mrs. Darkwood,” he said, rather wistfully ; “and something which Lady Tracy has this evening been telling me about your plans makes me trust—in fact, most sincerely hope—that you will give the idea your earnest consideration. Weigh it well, will you, when you have heard what it is ?”

“Stay—a moment ; there are a few questions

I should like to ask you," I began hurriedly. I leant against the wall as I spoke; I was very tired—I needed a prop of some kind. Time had been when I should have asked him for the aid of his arm; now it was impossible, I drearily told myself. "You will answer me?" said I.

"Certainly," he replied courteously—I fancied somewhat coldly. "But do you not think that it would be wiser for us to at once return to the house? I do not forget that you have been very ill; I cannot allow you to forget it either."

"I shall not hurt," I told him, with a *brusquerie* which was wholly due—I understood it afterwards—to intense nervousness. Heaven knows that I had no desire to treat with graceless incivility this good and rare friend of mine; but gradually the conviction was taking firm hold of me that this man in the churchyard, standing there with me in the pale moonlight, was not—emphatically not—the Leigh Eversleigh whom I used to know! A change was plainly discernible in him.

He was as kind, as courteous, as friendly as of yore; but something was wrong somewhere. Was it that his manner lacked the geniality, the winning warmth which had characterised it and

had made it such a pleasant manner in the days that were gone? And yet—and yet what was that wild bad tale that Daryl, in his cups, had told me at Thangate? . . . Ninety-nine women out of a hundred are notoriously inconsistent; and this indefinable change in Leigh Eversleigh irritated me curiously. Well, if he could grow cold, I could freeze; but never—Heaven help me!—would I be ungrateful to him.

“Where is Daryl?” I demanded abruptly.

“He is abroad,” Mr. Eversleigh gently replied.

“Abroad—where?”

“He is staying somewhere in the Saxon Switzerland region, at the Schloss of that friend of his, Herr von Rosenberg. The castle, I’ve heard, is romantically situated; and Darkwood, I believe, intends to utilise his opportunities—to turn the magnificent scenery amidst which at the present time he is living to substantial account.”

“That is so very likely; is it not?” I observed bitterly. “Of course you gave him the money to go? He could not have gone without money.”

After a brief pause, Leigh quietly answered,—

“I lent him the money, Mrs. Darkwood—yes.”

“You gave it to him,” I repeated, obstinately and gloomily.

Ever so slightly Mr. Eversleigh shrugged his shoulders; and so let the contradiction pass.

“And—and this, now,” I said, my voice growing once more faint and unsteady—“it was you, was it not, who caused that beautiful white cross to—to be placed over Isla’s grave?”

“Yes,” he answered, quite simply now. “It was I. Why not?”

“Ah, no, no—I cannot have it thus!” I cried brokenly. “It must not be!”

“Really I cannot comprehend why you should raise any objection, Mrs. Darkwood. In life I loved the child very dearly; and I believe the little one loved me. To do what I did was to me a sorrowful pleasure that I should take it very hard and cruel of you to in any wise spoil. I do pray you, let things remain as they are,” he said earnestly. “I shall feel hurt, deeply wounded, if you insist upon interfering in—in matters that, please understand, were long ago settled and done with. I shall begin to fancy else that you mistrust our—our friendship; that—that you do not believe in the spirit of it as heartily as you once used to do.”

He spoke with a sad gravity which seemed to

go straight to my heart and to pierce it. His eyes, I felt, though I could not look up to meet them, were resting upon me with something of reproach.

"You crush me with a burthen of obligations that never can be shaken off—never, never repaid," I groaned. A smothered sob escaped me; and I covered my face with my hands.

"Come, Mrs. Darkwood," I heard Leigh saying more cheerily, "you must return to the house. If you were to catch cold out here, the Viscountess, I know, would never forgive me. Let us be moving. Will you take my arm?"

"No—no, thank you," I murmured. "It is quite light. I can see very well."

"That was not my meaning. I thought that you—not yet being over strong—were in all likelihood feeling tired," he rejoined gravely.

"Oh, no!"—speaking as indifferently as I could; and I drew my cloak more closely around me. "Yes—let us be going; it is late," added I.

Ah me! Tired? Was I not tired both in body and in soul—unspeakably weary and leaden-hearted? Happy Isla—you, dear—at rest there beneath the dim and dewy turf!

We left the churchyard and closed the little gate; Mr. Eversleigh, his hands behind him, walking slowly in the grass by my side.

“By-the-bye,” he observed, “I saw some one in town the other day who inquired most kindly after your welfare, Mrs. Darkwood. Can you guess who it was?”

“No,” I said wonderingly—“who was it?” It could not be Mr. Binkworthy, I had instantly decided; and at the moment I could think of no other likely person. Nevertheless I added quickly, “Was it Mr. Binkworthy?”

“Mr. Binkworthy?” echoed Leigh; for a few seconds in doubt.

“Yes; Mr. Binkworthy—the manager of the *Levity*,” I said, with a flash of rather poor and uneasy defiance. “Of course you know that I have sung for a living at his variety theatre?”

“Yes,” he answered quietly, “I know that; but for the minute I had forgotten it. No, it was not Mr. Binkworthy; it was your old friend Mr. Jones; that selfsame old Mr. Jones who—who—”

“You mean the old Mr. Jones who lodged in Bentham Street?” I interrupted eagerly.

“Yes, it was he,” said Leigh.

“Ah, he was indeed a good and strangely kind old man!” I sighed, thinking of Isla and her brief pathetic past. “Always so—so good—so very good to my darling.”

“That I can readily understand. For he had once—long ago, in his better and brighter days—little children of his own. They are dead now; all dead and gone; and he is left in the world poor and alone—utterly alone,” said Leigh.

“It is singular that you should know him,” mused I aloud.

“I know him very well—in fact, I have known him very well for many years. At the present time he is acting as clerk to a barrister friend of mine,” said Mr. Eversleigh, somewhat hastily. “I—I always try to take care that in some way or other he is decently provided for. Poor lonely old fellow—I believe he would do anything for me!”

For some minutes we walked on in silence; I pondering many a circumstance—many a circumstance which perplexed and troubled me in no mean degree—that belonged to the dead gray past. I said abruptly,—

“Mr. Eversleigh, how did you first learn that I was engaged to sing at the theatre? And how did you first discover that I was living in out-of-the-way Bentham Street? Will you tell me?”

“Not to-night,” he answered, in the same halting yet hurried manner; “at some other time, perhaps—not to-night.”

“Why not to-night?” I persisted; somehow speaking more coldly by far than I wished to speak.

“I—I can hardly explain. For one thing, the story is too long, Mrs. Darkwood; and—and here we are, you see, close to the house. I shall not be surprised if we find Lady Tracy looking out for us. She is certain to be anxious about you; and—and will, as I said, naturally blame me if anything happens to—”

I checked him proudly.

“Perhaps,” I said, “you went one night to the theatre; in ‘Madame Fleurette’ recognised me; were amazed to find me earning a livelihood amid such odd surroundings; and out of curiosity you doubtless watched me, followed me home to Bentham Street—”

“You are wrong,” Leigh in his turn put in almost sternly. “I frankly admit—why indeed should I deny it?—that I did go many a time to the theatre to hear you sing—in fact, I went whenever I could; for you yourself well know, Mrs. Darkwood, how thoroughly I enjoy good music; particularly the music of a beautiful and cultivated voice like yours; but never once did I follow you, as you so harshly and unkindly put it, to the lodgings which at the time were your home. I trust you will believe what I say.”

“Well, I never recognised you amongst a Levity audience—never! Perhaps it was as well for me that I did not!” I exclaimed, in a somewhat hysterical key. “I suppose you hid yourself, Mr. Eversleigh, in one of those odious little narrow boxes with the tawdry hangings? They always made me nervous—I hated them! One could never tell for certain whether they were empty or occupied,” I added petulantly.

“Hid myself? Well, yes, if you like to put it so,” he remarked gently. “I seldom failed to come on those evenings when you sang ‘Kathleen Mavourneen’ and ‘The Better Land.’”

“And you will not tell me how you came to know that I had consented to sing for Mr. Binkworthy?” I questioned impatiently.

He seemed to be pondering something before he replied.

“Yes, I will tell you that,” he said at last, in a more friendly tone. “Old Mr. Jones, in the first instance, was my informant.”

“Old Mr. Jones again! Who—what,” I cried, in strong irritation, “was that shy and shadowy old man? The thought of him worries me; there is something behind it all—something I do not understand. Why will you not be more open, more explicit with me, Mr. Eversleigh?” I

demanded. "Old Mr. Jones, I imagine, likewise informed you that I lived in Bentham Street?"

"No."

A sudden thought, a fearful remembrance, like lightning struck across my mind. My hands involuntarily locked themselves together; my fingers working convulsively meanwhile.

"Oh, Mr. Eversleigh," I said with difficulty, my voice little better than a wild whisper—"I should have mentioned it before! Forgive me, forgive me—I am ungrateful—stop one moment!" I broke off, in speech more nervous and disjointed than ever. "Yonder, see, is an open window; it has just been thrown up; Lady Tracy herself stands there beckoning to us. One moment—stop!"

He halted directly within the shadow of a clump of flowering lilacs; their faint subtle fragrance upon the dewy night air was inexpressibly sweet; often the scent of those lilacs comes back to me in my happiest dreams. He grasped my trembling hands within his own warm strong ones; and firmly held them thus.

"Mrs Darkwood—my dear friend," said he very kindly, "you must be calmer. This excitement cannot be good for you; you will make yourself ill—"

“Hush! I must and will speak. On that fearful night in Bentham Street you arrived—you arrived not one moment too soon—ah, I recollect, I recollect!—but in time nevertheless to save me from the perpetration—the consequences of a deed so dreadful, so unnatural, that—that——” A violent shudder shook me from head to foot. I could not for a minute or so continue.

“Why speak of it?” Leigh was saying, really distressed. “It is past; over; let it rest and be forgotten. Why should it not be so? It is the better way.”

“No, no, no! But for you my hands would be red with blood—with the blood of Daryl Darkwood—my own husband! Ah, too horrible! But for you I should be a murderess—branded like Cain—yet God knows I did not mean it; I could not help it! I was not myself then; I was mad with grief on that cruel night; and my brain had already given way. Thank you, Mr. Eversleigh—thank you—thank you from the very depth of my heart for what you did for me in that terrible hour of need. Yes, I will thank you—I will; but after this night never to living soul will I speak of it again! I am utterly in ignorance as to how you contrived to come to me so opportunely. It may have been

pure chance—more likely it was the mercy and interposition of Heaven. Perhaps that shy and strange old man summoned you at a time when your presence was so sorely required? I know not; I cannot tell. And, though guessing is vain, I do know this—that I am grateful to you,” I cried passionately; “that my gratitude is a living gratitude—it never will die! Only when the breath leaves my body, when earth and earthly things grow dim for me, shall I cease to remember all—all that you have done for me—for my sake! To remember your nobility, your goodness, until death—that is easy. But to in any wise repay you so long as I am alive—ah, that is impossible!”

“Do not—do not put it so! Oh, if you could only understand!” he was beginning almost as impulsively and as passionately as I myself had spoken. But he appeared, with an effort, to check himself; and said soothingly, if somewhat incoherently: “Yes, Mrs. Darkwood, it was old Mr. Jones; there is no reason why you should not know it. Often through him I have heard what—what you were doing; how you and—and the child were getting along in the new life. Being aware, you see, that—that I was a friend of yours,

and convinced that, on that winter night, you were in very real need of a true friend's help and counsel, he journeyed in haste to my chambers to—to inform me of your dire necessity. Unluckily, when he arrived in the Temple, he learnt that I was out—dining, it so chanced, at a house in a distant suburb. But—but, determined to find me—the plucky old man!—and to bring me to you if it were possible, he hailed a cab, the best he could secure, and—and managed, after considerable delay, to discover whither I had gone. Thank Heaven," said Leigh Eversleigh hurriedly, lifting his face, which in the moonlight looked singularly pale and earnest, to the silent stars—"I was not too late!"

"Yes; for that shall I thank Heaven until my dying day!" I cried, with another hysterical catch in my voice. "Mr. Eversleigh, if Lady Tracy were not watching us from that window in the drawing-room, I would kneel here upon the ground at your feet—yes, I would, I would!—and kiss your hands, and thank you humbly thus for——"

"Mrs. Darkwood," he broke in hoarsely; "you must not—indeed you must not. I cannot bear it—to hear you. You pain me unspeakably—you are too——"

But at that instant Aurora, having lost all patience, was advancing towards us swiftly over the silvery lawn; a fleecy white wrap flung carelessly about her head and shoulders. Indeed she picked up her train and ran; and, joining us without ceremony, interrupted Mr. Eversleigh.

“Upon my word,” cried the Viscountess, rather out of breath, “you ought to know better—both of you! How on earth can you be so unwise—and not yet May, too? Why, the ground is soaking; these dewy spring nights are abominably treacherous. Flower, my dear, you want to catch your death, I should imagine; and really I had almost said that you deserve to do so. Well,” exclaimed Aurora impatiently, perceiving that we had neither of us a word of any kind ready just then—“what does Flower say to your proposition, Mr. Eversleigh? If she is so bent upon carrying out this absurd nursing whim of hers, I should imagine that the idea would meet with her warmest approbation. It is just the very thing!”

“We have not discussed the matter yet,” replied Leigh, trying to answer the Viscountess in his natural, pleasant manner. “I think now, Lady Tracy, that it must wait until to-morrow.

I am sure Mrs. Darkwood is much too fatigued to listen to me to-night."

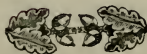
"Good gracious," cried Aurora, in her brightest and bluntest fashion—"not discussed the matter yet! Why, what in the world then have you been talking about all this long while? Loftus, who is dying for a cigar and a chat with you, Mr. Eversleigh, would have it that you and Mrs. Darkwood had lost your way—perhaps strayed into the water-cress brook—and he wanted to come and look for you himself."

I waited to hear no more.

Like a ghost I stole away from them, and glided into the house; across the hall; up the stairs; and, as I had done on returning from our drive in the afternoon, I gained my own rooms and there locked myself in.

What a puzzle and a maze was life! thought I heavily. Was it actually worth living, after all?

For some people, I told myself emphatically—"No!"





CHAPTER XXXV.

I SLEPT badly on that night of Leigh Eversleigh's brief sojourn at Arley Bridge; and, as a matter of course, in the morning I awoke but ill refreshed and feeling far from well.

When Lady Tracy's maid Emilia brought the warm water for my bath, I told her to give my love to the Viscountess and to say that I should not come downstairs to breakfast; I would rather take it—merely some tea and a little dry toast—alone in my own dressing-room.

Emilia, in her province, was a treasure. The tea and the toast which she by-and-by appeared with were precisely as one would wish to have them. A tepid bath and this slight breakfast seemed to do me a great deal of good.

About ten o'clock I went downstairs; and, with a book which at the time I was reading, and

a Chinese umbrella in case a shield of the kind were needed, I forthwith made my way out into the fresh air of the garden.

It was a lovely morning—warm, clear, and with a high and cloudless sky—a real foretaste of the summer that was now so near at hand. The turf of the wide neat lawns was hardly yet dry ; in the shade the dew still lingered, glistening upon drooping grasses and budding fronds ; in the sunlight floated the fairy gossamer, perhaps like the severed threads in the magic web of the Lady of Shalott.

Industriously the bees went humming from flower to flower, plainly loving best the tall old-fashioned ones ; a blackbird, “with orange-tawny bill,” was piping flute-like in the twisted old mulberry tree hard by the library window.

The leaves had thickened early this beautiful spring-time ; the gardeners had already set out the rustic seats and tables in the pleasantest corners of the Arley Bridge grounds.

Not far from the house, sheltered by noble elms, there was a kind of grotto ; where a pool for goldfish had been sunk and made picturesque, built round, as it was, with great rugged stones and gnarled brown roots from the Arley woods ; with mosses and ferns growing luxuriantly about

the brink of it, and dipping their delicate greenery into the cool dusky water. The broad leaves of the water-lily, too, floated stilly there upon the unruffled pool; the close-shut pale green buds of the lovely flower itself as yet showed no sign of bursting; and the fish sought shelter beneath those wide smooth leaves, occasionally gleaming far down in the water like jewels seen in the dark.

Here I seated myself upon a wooden seat—it was a favourite haunt of mine—and, forgetting the book that I had brought with me out-of-doors, fell to listening idly to the cawing of the rooks in the faintly rustling elm-tops overhead.

How harsh and solemn sounded the monotonous “caw-caw” of the grim old patient parent birds; how peevish and discordant were the cries of the young ones, calling out insatiably for the living dainties foraged for their benefit from the moist hillside!

So it went on, “caw-caw—caw-caw,” throughout the livelong day.

With a start I brought my eyes earthward; footsteps were approaching. I perceived then that the garden-door in the library passage was open, and that Lord Tracy and his wife were coming towards me.

Aurora herself, rather to my surprise, was dressed for travelling ; looking simply bewitching in a perfectly-fitting brown tailor-made gown and a most captivating brown straw “princess” bonnet trimmed with brown velvet and a bunch of bright yellow cowslips. Lord Tracy, too, was wearing a new spring overcoat, a white scarf and gold horse-shoe pin. There was “Bond Street” in every seam of this young man’s clothes.

“What—you are going to town?” I exclaimed involuntarily; when Lady Tracy had kissed me in her hearty affectionate fashion, and the Viscount had crushed my hand within his, fervently hoping that I was “a lot better.”

“Yes; I have some shopping to do,” briskly replied Aurora; “and I intend to try Whiteley’s for a change; and Loftus is going to Cribb’s and then on to Tattersall’s. So we shall lunch in town—and don’t you wait, dear Flower.”

“I presume Mr. Eversleigh will accompany you, Lord Tracy?” observed I, carelessly turning to the young man, who was pressing against his teeth the silver crook of his walking-stick.

“Well—er—well, no, Mrs. Darkwood,” hesitated he, thus suddenly appealed to, flushing rather pink and glancing at Aurora for wifely guidance; uncertain as to whether he was saying

“the right thing” or was “putting his foot into it,” as he would have expressed it; “we are—er—driving, you see, to-day; and Eversleigh will come on later by train, he says. He’s writing letters in the library now—isn’t he, Aurora?”

“Yes; but when we are out of the way, my dear boy, he is coming out to talk to Mrs. Darkwood. So we will be off,” replied she.

“Aurora,” I said, somewhat stiffly, “I should very much like to go to town with you this morning. I too have some shopping to do—I remember now; and if you will wait for me, I shall not be five minutes putting on my things—”

“Out of the question, my dear,” cried Aurora blithely. “I am going with Loftus in that new American dog-cart of his—it’s an awfully high and perilous-looking affair; so don’t in the least be astonished if we come to grief. I wouldn’t for the world, Flower, have you risk your neck; and if Loftus breaks mine, I’ll never forgive him!”

“Oh, I say, that’s good!” put in his lordship, smiling delightedly, as if his wife had said a really brilliant thing.

"I rather like a high dog-cart," I cried quickly and without reflection. "Cannot I go, Aurora?"

"I am very sorry—I think not. It would look too droll, dear Flower, I fancy, to see you perched up on the back-seat by the side of Dickson, you know. You must wait until to-morrow; and then we'll have the carriage and go together, dear, wherever you like. Good-bye!"

She laughed gaily; waved a faultlessly bronze-gloved hand; and hurried her husband away towards the front of the house, almost before that obedient young man himself could snatch off his hat in adieu. Aurora was still his bright exacting empress; he still remained her most willing and adoring slave.

Alone again in the pleasant shadow of the grotto under the elms, within myself I began to wonder how, after our emotional parting of the previous night, I and Leigh Eversleigh would meet on this day? For, after all, regarding the question from a calm and common-sense point of view, it was ridiculous to think of running away from him. He had something to say to me; and he must say it. To avoid him at Arley Bridge was for me, it seemed, impossible—flight was absurd; he himself, I thought feverishly,

would have left the house ere the day ended ; and then, and not before, should I know peace of mind once more.

The earlier he went the happier I should feel, I told myself restlessly. Let the interview, then, whatever might be the nature of it, be got over as quickly as possible ; let me be free again and alone, in my heart I cried querulously, to settle unaided the course of my future life ! What had Leigh Eversleigh to do with it ?

Even as my thoughts ran thus busily and impatiently, with perfect self-possession he joined me in the garden and sat down by my side upon the rustic seat. With his own genial smile he inquired after my health ; hoped that I was better—he assured me that I was looking so—or, at all events, was likely to reap no punishment for my imprudence of the foregoing evening. He remarked upon the extraordinary loveliness of the day ; the sweetness and beauty of the Arley Bridge grounds ; the bright kindness and hospitality of Lord and Lady Tracy.

“ How contented and happy they seem together ! ” said Leigh ; and I quietly agreed that they did ; moreover believed with him that they

were in truth so. But we did not shake hands with each other, he and I.

Was the omission of the act, I wondered, not without a pang of discontent, due to him or to me—his fault or mine?

Again, as on the night before, I realised that Leigh Eversleigh was not the Leigh Eversleigh of the old Chesterfield Avenue and Thangate days. Yet how subtle, how indefinable was the change in him! Kind, winningly kind, friendly and courteous he certainly was; but, ah, again there was no mistaking the fact—he was cold and distant withal!

Perhaps it was as well; his self-command enabled me to keep my own. However, self-possessed as I outwardly appeared, I remember that my heart-beats were stormy enough.

Very soon Mr. Eversleigh pulled out his watch.

"I must catch the 12.25 from Arley up to town," he observed thoughtfully; "for old Mr. Jones, I recollect, is coming to lunch with me at my chambers to-day."

"Indeed?" said I coldly.

"Yes. So pardon me, Mrs. Darkwood, if I hurry on to tell you what I have to say—what I came down to Arley Bridge expressly

to talk over with you : with you and nobody else."

"It would be a pity to miss your train, Mr. Eversleigh. Believe me, I am listening."

And speaking, I leisurely put aside my book and Chinese umbrella ; laying them for the present upon the seat at my side ; and folded my hands in my lap.

For an instant he looked at me keenly ; then said, with no further preamble,—

" Lady Tracy tells me, Mrs. Darkwood, that, if you can in any manner make arrangements with the Lady Abbess, it is your intention to enter the Sisterhood of the Convent of St. Corde ia ? "

" That is quite right. "

" It is a singular decision, " mused Leigh aloud.

" Singular, " I echoed, with something like scorn—" how so ? Am I then the first unhappy woman, think you, who has grown sick of the world and of life, and who longs with a passionate longing for that peace which the world cannot give ? It may not be exactly heaven within those convent walls ; nevertheless there are to be found within them tranquillity of mind, hard, useful work, and, above all, a

peace that is as the reflex of the peace of heaven itself. I ask, I expect no more so long as I live."

"It is a Catholic sisterhood," suggested Leigh very gravely.

"I know it," I answered, as quietly and as gravely as he.

"Mrs. Darkwood, have I your whole attention?" inquired Leigh. The gentleness and gravity were gone from his voice; his manner was once more prompt and business-like; but kind as ever.

"Of course," I replied, with some impatience. "I told you that you had a minute ago."

"Good."

And then Mr. Eversleigh at once proceeded to make clear to me the errand which had brought him down to Arley Bridge.

"It is an odd circumstance," said he, with another glance at his watch, "that I should have arrived here for the purpose which I have in mind precisely at a time when you have determined upon the taking of so serious a step. You say that you are sick of the world and its ways; that you long for quiet, peace, and yet not an idle tranquillity—a retired life, in short, and a useful one? I think that I can help

you to find what you now desire, Mrs. Darkwood, without your going to the grave length of entering a Catholic sisterhood like that of St. Cordelia."

"You can—you really can?" I said quickly, for an instant looking at him with interest and strong curiosity combined.

"Yes. I daresay you have not forgotten our conversation about—about Redknights; I mean the conversation we had about the old house and its people when—when we were at Than-gate last year?" Leigh said, hesitating a little now.

"Redknights?" I echoed faintly.

"Yes, Redknights—Daryl Darkwood's old home," replied Leigh; this time quite firmly. "Surely you remember?"

"I—I remember perfectly," I assured him in a low voice.

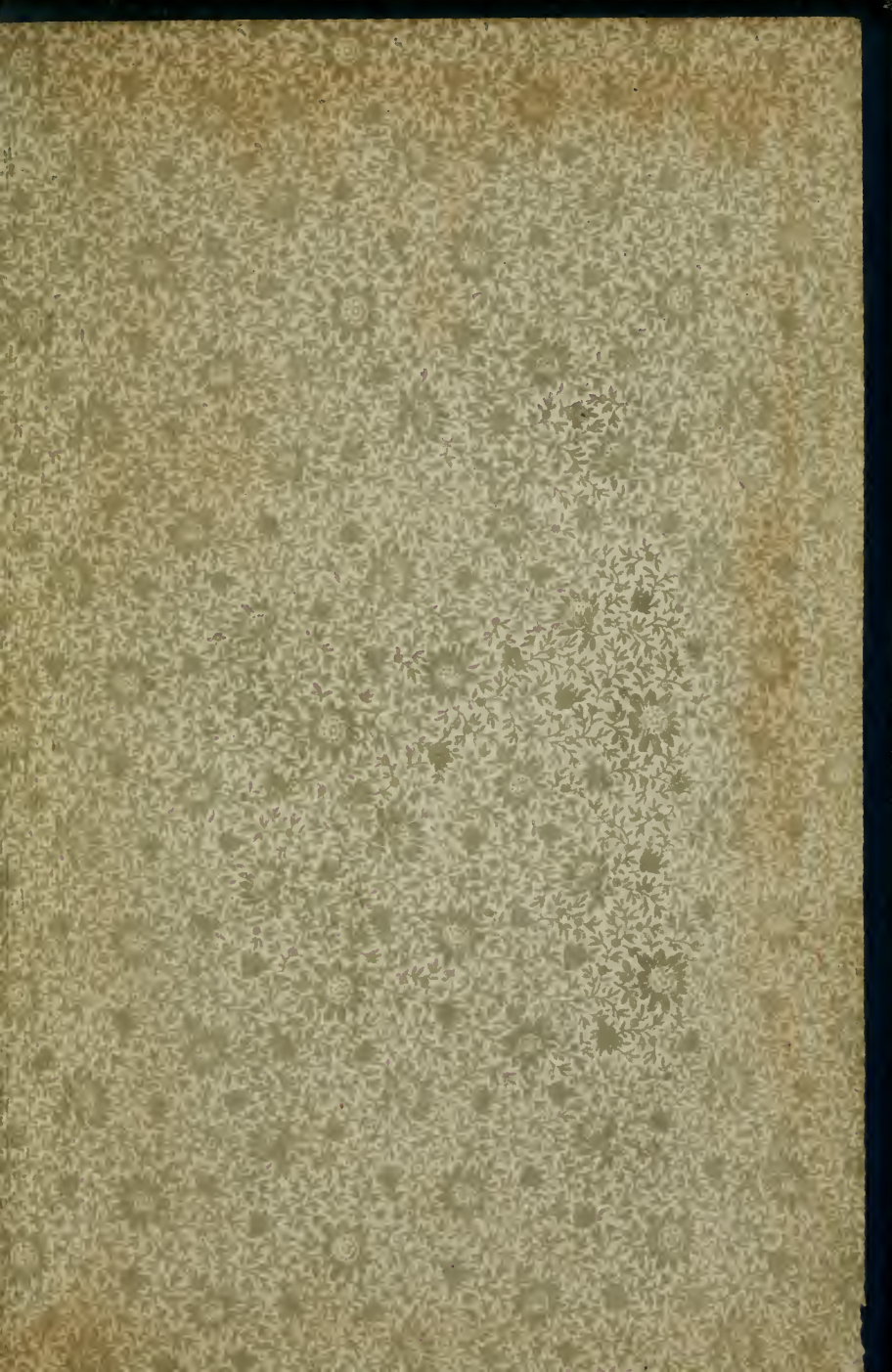
"Well, Mrs. Darkwood, it rests with yourself," said Mr. Eversleigh impressively. "You can—should it so please you—there, in the old home of your husband, down in Buckinghamshire, for a certainty find the quiet and useful life which your soul is at present yearning for. Listen to me—do be advised by me—I beg you, Mrs. Darkwood! Dismiss forthwith that solemn and un-

comfortable thought of immuring yourself within narrow, dreary convent walls ; and bravely go and do the good work that awaits you—at Redknights.

END OF VOL. II.







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